



The  
Sweet  
Cheyenne  
Quartet  
Book 1



They need  
each other  
to survive...  
but their  
families need  
a reason to  
celebrate.



# A Cheyenne CHRISTMAS

Caroline Lee  
Bestselling Author

They need each other to survive... but their families need a reason to celebrate. Ash Barker and his brother had just about built their ranch into a success when he busted his arm trying to tame a particularly nasty mustang. Now they're headed into Cheyenne's harsh winter with fewer hands and a very real danger of failure. They need someone else—anyone else—out there with them, to make it through this season. Molly Murray's dream of owning her own bakery went up in flames with the Great Chicago Fire. She's been supporting her younger sisters for the last four years, and it seems like the Cheyenne wilderness might be her last chance to give them all a real home. But no one will hire her... until she meets the intimidatingly masculine, incredibly handsome, and very desperate Ash Barker. Can their unique families blend in time to celebrate their first real Cheyenne Christmas? \* \* \* Fall in love with the series that reviewers are calling "heartwarming", "realistically sweet" and full of "lovable characters"... fall in love with The Sweet Cheyenne Quartet Heat Level: 1 out of 5 (very sweet) Suitable for all audiences \*\*

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## A Cheyenne Christmas

Caroline Lee

*For all of us Mollys who were  
surprised—and delighted—to  
discover the beautiful ordinariness  
of True Love.*

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## Table of Contents

Chapter 1 ..... 1

Chapter 2 .....	12
Chapter 3 .....	18
Chapter 4 .....	25
Chapter 5 .....	38
Chapter 6 .....	44
Chapter 7 .....	54
Chapter 8 .....	63
Chapter 9 .....	71
Chapter 10 .....	79
Chapter 11 .....	88
Chapter 12 .....	100
Chapter 13 .....	110
Chapter 14 .....	121

## **Chapter 1**

### **December 1875**

Ash started grumbling again when he hit the outskirts of Cheyenne. He had been cursing under his breath for hours, since he left the house. Nah, he'd been cursing since he found Nate's note in the barn, and he hadn't stopped since.

He had cursed his way through hitching the horse up to the sleigh, because anyone who'd ever done that with only one arm knew how tough it was. But it was loads easier than trying to saddle a horse one-handed. There hadn't been any fresh snow in a few days; it would be an easy enough journey.

He had followed the kid's tracks all the way into town. Nate hadn't bothered to backtrack or hide his trail, but Ash knew the kid wasn't stupid; there was only one place he could have been heading, and they both knew it. It wasn't a question of *where* he was, but if Ash could reach him before he did anything dumber, like leave Cheyenne altogether or get himself hurt.

The sight of the town—growing into a city these days, really—always left Ash with a bitter taste in his mouth, although this time he couldn't blame his bad temper on Nate. When he had moved into the area ten years before, there were barely a handful of buildings at Crow Creek Crossing, which suited him just fine. He could enjoy the privacy his hills offered, and still have some basic dry goods within a half-day's ride. But then the Union Pacific Railroad came through in summer of '67, and decided that this sleepy little collection of stores

and churches would be a prime depot. Before the end of that year there were close to 4,000 people living all bunched up next to each other.

Ash wasn't against change or modernity, he just didn't see why folks would want to live on top of their neighbors. He had lived like that once, years ago, and wanted nothing to do with it these days. There might be benefits to living so close to doctors, or saloons, or schools, but nothing that would outweigh the freedom and vitality he felt when he rode across his land.

There had been once or twice over the years that he'd felt guilty about keeping Nate out there with him, when the boy deserved the chance at a real life in town. Someplace he could meet other kids his age and go to a real school, instead of learning letters hunched over a slate in front of a fire after all the day's chores were done. But every time Ash suggested that Nate head into town for the school year, the boy's stubborn streak had shone through. He insisted that he'd rather be on the ranch with Ash, rather be helpful, than stuck in 'civilization'. Since Ash felt the same way, he hadn't pushed the matter.

But lately they'd been fighting more, over inconsequential stuff. Ash figured it was what happened to most youngsters, as they started exploring their limits. Hell, when he was the kid's age, he was already hunting buffalo for the Army. But then, he'd never had anyone back home who cared what happened to him. So he'd made his own way in the world. He had figured he was happiest being alone, until that warm spring day nine years ago, when a scrawny, half-starved urchin had followed him home. It had taken two weeks just to plump the kid up enough that Ash had been sure he would survive, and another two before he could spare the time from the ranch to take him back into town. By then, though, Nate had made himself at home, even calling Ash "big brother" as a joke. But the name stuck, and within the year Ash was thinking of Nate as a younger brother; a pest, but someone who he could rely on. Someone he cared about.

He truly thought of Nate, now fifteen, as his brother. They were each the only family that the other had. But they bickered and argued over stupid stuff they'd never bothered with before, and matters had come to a head yesterday.

Ash was willing to admit that he had been short-tempered since late October, when he'd been thrown and busted his arm so badly. To go from able-bodied to half-helpless was damned galling, but with Nate helping so much, they had managed to get all of the horses settled for the winter. And maybe that was the issue; with Nate taking over so much responsibility on the ranch, he probably figured that he was due a little more say in how it was run. Not that Ash wasn't

willing to listen to his brother's opinions, but when the kid had started in—yet again—about how they should be breeding the mustangs they tamed, rather than just training and selling them, the two of them had it out. Again.

Only this time, Nate hadn't backed down. He'd stood up to Ash, and yeah, he had some good points, but nothing Ash hadn't heard—and thought—before. But the simple fact was that the ranch was Ash's, something he had built from nothing before Nate was even in the picture. It was *his* skill with the mustangs that made catching and taming them worthwhile, and his ranch was known well beyond Cheyenne as the place to come for quality horseflesh. He'd taught Nate over the years, and the kid was almost as good as he was when it came to horses. Honestly, Nate had better business sense than Ash, and could get top dollar for their mustangs. But the decision on how to expand the ranch rested ultimately with Ash.

At least, that's what he'd always figured. But during that knock-down argument they'd had last night, when it sunk in that Nate considered the ranch his home just as much as Ash did, and was vested in its success just as much, Ash began to wonder if maybe he'd been wrong to not allow the kid a say in its future. Of course, he didn't admit that last night, just yelled back the hurtful, bossy things he knew would piss off Nate, as if he were no more mature than a kid himself. He was so disgusted with himself this morning that he didn't even leave his room until he heard Nate finish eating and stomp out the door. Which is why he didn't discover that the kid was gone until the sun was well up in the sky.

He *had* left a note, which Ash supposed he should be thankful for, knowing exactly where to look. He stood there at the barn door and had to read the note three times to understand what it said; Nate was bitter that Ash didn't appreciate his contributions, and was going to find someplace that would. Ash was angry at first, and then disbelieving. And then the worry set in. The tracks leading towards Cheyenne said that Nate was making good on his threat, and he was stubborn enough that he might just leave the ranch for good, no matter how much sweat and blood they'd both poured into it.

And if it'd been a normal year, Ash was just stubborn enough to let him go. Nah, that wasn't true, he'd light out after the kid soon enough, just because there was no telling what kind of troubles he would find in Cheyenne. But this year was different. Winter was heading down on them with a vengeance, and with his bum arm, Nate was doing most of the work around the ranch. It galled Ash to admit it, but he needed the kid. The *ranch* needed him.

With Nate's help, he'd been able to build up their operation to the point where two men could just about handle the land and the horses;

he'd never have been able to get this far on his own. But when he busted his left arm, and Nate dragged him into town to have Doc Sanderson set it, he'd put everything they'd worked for on the line. With only three good hands, they were going to be hard pressed to survive the winter. Not just the horses either; the two of them had been eating jerky and tinned fruits, and living in filth, for a month. Sure, they wouldn't *die* because of a little dirt, but things were precarious enough as it was. Not being able to cook with fresh food, or make the things they used around the house, meant that they had to buy everything in town. But they were eating through their savings much faster than normal, and later in the season they wouldn't even be able to get into town, which meant that starving was a possibility. If he couldn't figure out how to get some extra money, or some help out on the ranch, there was a very real chance they would have to drive their stock into town and sell it in exchange for boarding, which means they'd basically lose the ranch.

They were balancing on a thin line as it was, and now Ash had driven his little brother away, because he was too stubborn to admit that the kid might have some valid points.

And *that's* why he'd been cursing, all the way into town. He was angry at Nate, but plain livid with himself.

Now, having deposited the whole rig at the livery stable in town, Ash only hoped he wasn't too late. Where would a fifteen-year-old kid hide out? Where would he be that he figured his big brother—with tracking experience—wouldn't find him? There were people in a town like this that would happily take advantage of a kid like Nate, or worse, and Ash hoped he hadn't gotten himself into trouble already. Most everyone in Cheyenne knew of Ash, seeing as he'd been ranching here before the town itself started, but that didn't mean that Nate was safe from hateful prejudice.

With that sobering thought, Ash turned up the collar of his sheepskin jacket, awkward with only one hand, pulled his hat down further around his ears, and set off to find his brother.

Molly Murray was impressed by Cheyenne, despite the trepidation she'd felt knowing it was named after a bunch of savage Indians. At least, she assumed they'd be savages. That was all they ever heard about back them in Chicago; how savage the natives were, and how they needed to be civilized and cultured. Why, her parents had often donated money to missionaries intent on spreading the Gospel to the heathens.

But here was a bustling city—not on par with Chicago, of course—named after the Cheyenne. She sighed, and suspected that was one more stereotype she was going to have to rethink when she settled out here. Lord knew that her personal comfort levels had been breached

many times on this trip, and she was coming to realize just how little she knew about life outside of her own little world. But she was a fast learner, and anyone who could make it through a childhood of disillusionment, the Great Chicago Fire, and this horrible trip west could survive—thrive!—here in Cheyenne.

And she would, by God. She had no other choice. She'd originally considered continuing on to Salt Lake City, but the girls only had another two weeks on their lease, and she needed to get them out here with her as soon as possible. Whether or not they all continued to Utah Territory in the spring was a decision that could wait; for now she needed to find work and bring her sisters to this city.

She had left them over two months ago, heading across Illinois and then Iowa, looking for work. Oh, there was plenty of work to be had, and plenty of vulgar propositions, but nothing that a well-bred young woman would ever consider. When she reached Omaha, she thought she'd found a budding town that would welcome them, but quickly learned that all "job offers" came with a tawdry price she was unwilling to pay. She was beginning to despair ever finding a place to call home, knowing that most establishments wouldn't hire a single woman to cook, when she'd heard about the larger towns in the west. Why, Cheyenne could even be considered a city! Somewhere in this maze of buildings there had to be one place—a hotel, possibly, or maybe even a restaurant—that would give her the chance to show them her skills in the kitchen.

She hefted her valise, containing her immediate necessities and all of her treasured spices and mixes, and couldn't help the smile that flitted across her face.

Here she was, all the way out west in Cheyenne, and she'd make a home for herself and her sisters, at least until the spring. Come hell or high water.

An angry voice from inside the train depot gained her attention. "What do you mean, there's no stock car? There's always a stock car on this run. How am I supposed to get my horse to Salt Lake?" She didn't hear the response, the voice rose in volume. "*Sell* him? Are you nuts? Don't answer that. When's the next train with a stock car?" A pause, and then "Oh, I don't care, *anywhere*."

Molly turned towards the door, thinking to arrange to have her trunk left here at the station until she could find lodging. She was trying to distract herself and block out the one-sided argument, but the offended party almost knocked her down when he strode out to depot's front porch.

He caught her upper arms to keep her from falling, and her reprimand died on her lips. Why, he wasn't any older than Wendy! A boy, really, with beautiful hazel eyes and longish black hair... her

breath caught in her throat. Perhaps it was because she'd just been thinking about the Cheyenne Indians, and that's why her brain leapt to conclusions, but the boy looked for all the world the way she'd imagined an Indian, only dressed in a warm jacket and jeans, rather than buckskins.

He misinterpreted her gasp, and quickly dropped his hands. His gaze turned wary; "Sorry, ma'am."

Molly forced her gaze away, and made a show of straightening her sleeves. "No harm done at all!" Her smile, when she glanced back at him, was genuine, and she couldn't help the burst of curiosity. "Thank you for catching me, in fact."

His eyes narrowed slightly, as if he was suspicious of her politeness. His voice, which had been raised in a shout just moments ago, was little more than a mumble now. "Shouldn't have been in such a hurry."

"Well, that's true." Her teasing surprised him, judging from his quick smile. "I couldn't help but overhear that your travel plans have been interrupted, because there's no place for your horse on the train?"

He nodded, and shrugged. "I'll ride on until I find a train with a stock car, or until I find a town I like enough to stay."

She smiled, trying to draw him out. "I was in the exact same situation, but I've been very pleased with what I've heard and seen of Cheyenne, and I think that this is a town in which I'd like to settle. Is there nothing here that draws you?"

Was that a flush creeping up his neck? It was hard to tell, with his tanned skin. "Plenty here I want to get away from, I guess."

Oh dear. Molly stopped herself from sighing. He was in some sort of trouble, and anxious to leave the city. Suddenly, his willingness to take any train in any direction made sense. She wanted to know what sort of trouble could follow such a polite young man, but didn't know how to ask. Instead, she shifted her valise to her left hand, and stuck out her right. "I'm Molly Murray, lately of Chicago."

He hesitated before putting his hand in hers. "Nate Barker."

Unwilling to break contact, she leaned in, and he had no choice but to join her, with her pulling on his hand the way she was. Her voice was low, but her interest genuine, when she said, "I know this is presumptuous, Mr. Barker, and I'm sorry, but..." She swallowed, but before she could lose her nerve, "are you an Indian?"

He straightened suddenly, pulling his hand from hers. The anger was back in his eyes, and she was sorry she'd offended him. She supposed it *had* been a rude question, and she shouldn't have asked it. "I'm sorry." When his gaze didn't thaw, she bit her lower lip and looked away. "I'm sorry, that was rude, and I shouldn't have asked.



It's just... well... It's so exciting, to be here." She turned towards the bustling street, with its horse and wagon traffic, so unlike Chicago. "I was wondering about the name of this town, and then you showed up, and I've never seen an Indian, and I thought maybe you could tell me about it. I didn't mean to be rude."

She peeked over at him, when he joined her at the rail, hands shoved deep in his pockets. He was tall, but she could still stand eye-to-eye with him. He wasn't looking at her, but at the handsome chestnut stallion hitched to the rail below. She could see the mulish tilt of his chin, and the shock of black hair under the hat he'd donned.

Finally he sighed. "It's fine. Just not something you ask a man, usually." Molly hid her smile. A 'man', indeed. "Out here, having Indian blood's nothing to be proud of, you know? So if you look like me, people just assume the worst." He was quiet for a long moment, and Molly wondered if she should apologize for 'assuming the worst' again. But his voice was low when he admitted, "And they're right about me."

Her brows shot up. Oh! He *was* an Indian! She turned to him, excited, "Why, that's so interesting! Can you tell me about—"

He shook his head to cut her off. "No ma'am, I'm sorry. My mother was a half-breed, and I was born a bastard." He obviously thought to shock her, but she didn't let anything other than polite interest show on her face. "I get all the prejudice and hate, but don't know anything about the Indians in these parts. Or any parts."

*Well.* How was one supposed to respond to that? "I'm sorry."

He shrugged, his nonchalance not quite believable. "No big deal, I stay out of town as much as possible, and no one bothers—" His gaze was suddenly arrested by something down the street. She couldn't tell where he was looking, but she could feel his alertness. "Aww, hell." He turned to her, tipped his hat, and muttered "Nice meeting you, ma'am" as he brushed past to hurry down the steps to his horse.

A roar stopped him. Striding down the street was the largest man Molly had ever seen, even at this distance. His jacket stretched across shoulders impossibly wide, and his legs were well-muscled. He had a thick beard that covered all but his eyes, but she could see them in the shadow of the ubiquitous brimmed hat everyone seemed to wear out here. He wasn't wearing any guns, like she'd heard some men did, but he didn't look like he'd need any. One arm was tucked tightly against his side, but the other was fisted, and he looked angry enough to do some damage.

Oh Lord, he was coming this way. Nate sighed, and stepped into the center of the road. The few pedestrians hurried to get out from between them, and Molly was struck with the oddest sensation that she was watching some sort of showdown. Was this the trouble Nate

was running from?

Then her suspicions were confirmed. The giant rocked to a stop, and roared again, loudly enough that even she flinched. “*Nathanial Barker!* I’m going to beat you black and blue!”

And suddenly she was too angry to be frightened of this monster. How *dare* he threaten such a sweet boy? Certainly, she didn’t know the entire story behind this trouble, but even if it was the worst possible, there was no need to threaten such extreme violence. For goodness’ sakes, Nate wouldn’t be able to stand up to even one of the giant’s blows, and here he was being intimidated with more than that!

Incensed on Nate’s behalf, she dropped her bag, hitched up her skirts, and hurried down the stairs. Nate had just opened his mouth to call back, when she moved to stand in front of him.

She put as much authority into her voice and bearing as possible, refusing to let this monster see how she was quaking. “Shame on you, sir! Bullying a young man like this!”

The giant didn’t respond, didn’t move, but she heard Nate sigh behind her. “Mrs. Murray—”

“It’s ‘Miss’, actually.” She didn’t know why she was bothering to whisper back, at a time when any moment the brute in front of them could choose to end their lives, but it seemed important.

“Fine, Miss Murray. This really isn’t something—”

“You about done hiding behind a woman’s skirts, kid?” This roar was less powerful; she could hear the smile in the brute’s voice and could feel Nate bristling behind her. He touched her once, on her elbow. “Scuse me, ma’am,” as he stepped around her.

And then to her surprise, he started walking *towards* the giant! She held up a hand to stop him, but then shut her mouth thoughtfully. Molly had always known what was best, and right, but here in Cheyenne there might be other rules. This was a whole new world, and she was the newcomer. She didn’t know what was normal, or what was right.

When Nate stopped a few feet from the giant, Molly wished she could hear what was being said. There were one or two exchanges, and then the brute’s free arm shot out and grabbed Nate by the front of his jacket. Before she could shout a warning, he had pulled the boy towards him, their noses only inches apart, and he was punctuating his low tirade with shakes. Nate was just standing there, being yelled at.

Molly was appalled that her instincts had been right, that this man wanted to do harm to Nate. She picked up her skirts to hurry down the street packed with muddy snow, not sure what she would do when she reached the pair. But then, suddenly, he rules changed again.

The stranger dropped his hold on Nate's jacket, and instead pulled the boy into as fierce a hug as Molly had ever seen. The boy stood stiffly for a long moment, and then wrapped his arms around the giant.

And there they stood, in the sludge of the Cheyenne streets, hugging. Molly, still holding her skirts out of the snow, slowly walked back towards the depot, glancing back often. She'd learned an important lesson within her first moments in Cheyenne, that things weren't always what they seemed.

She wished she could say goodbye to Nate, but she'd embarrassed herself enough for one afternoon. Instead, she turned her attention to arranging transport for her trunks to a suitably inexpensive hotel, and finding the job that would keep her and her sisters from starving.

## Chapter 2

She was feeling optimistic the next morning. She'd been able to find a hotel that seemed respectable enough, while not so expensive as to deplete her funds. She'd be able to stay here for a few days, while she found a boarding house for her and the girls. Now the challenge was going to be to find someplace that would hire an unmarried woman as a cook, or preferably a baker.

As such, she was wearing one of her nicer dresses, a gray wool with matching jacket that always made her feel more elegant than she really was. Molly was striding determinedly for the front door when she was stopped by a familiar voice calling her name.

There, tucked in one of the alcoves at a table set for two, sat Nate and the giant. The boy looked none the worse for wear after yesterday's ordeal, and in fact had a grin on his face. After making sure he was hale and hearty, her gaze swept to his companion.

Had she thought him big before? Up close, he was tremendous! They'd both stood up when she joined them, and Molly had to tilt her head back to look into his eyes. She was tall enough that most men stood eye-to-eye with her, but this... this *brute* was half a head taller still. Without his hat, she could see that he had the same dark hair as Nate, but the similarities ended there. His face was covered in a thick, bushy beard that hid everything but a set of remarkably soft gray eyes. They seemed almost... gentle, which didn't match the breadth of those shoulders barely encased in a plaid blue shirt. His left arm was in a sling, but he'd seemed to be managing his steak and eggs well enough when she'd arrived.

She knew her acknowledging nod to him was wary, but she couldn't help it. She was embarrassed by her foolish actions yesterday, but still didn't understand what had happened.

Nate seemed to sense her confusion. “Miss Murray, this is my brother, Ash Barker. He owns a spread out of town about a half-day’s ride. He’s been working it since before Cheyenne was even here.”

His brother? Well, she supposed that answered that question. Whatever Nate had done to anger Mr. Barker didn’t mean the man didn’t still love the boy, which explained the yelling *and* the hug. Lord knew she’d been tempted to scream and shake Wendy more than once when the silly girl burned dinner *yet again*, but that didn’t mean she didn’t love her sister.

She sighed, embarrassed further at the knowledge that Nate had never been in any real danger from this man, and stuck her hand out for a shake, prepared for a bone-crushing grip. But his hand was surprisingly warm and gentle when it cupped hers, and his face remained impassive. He really was intimidating, wasn’t he?

“Molly Murray, Mr. Barker. I’m sorry for my presumption yesterday.” She knew she was blushing in embarrassment, but forced herself to apologize anyhow.

“Call me Ash, please.” And then, with the suddenness of a summer storm, a flash of white teeth among that beard. “I appreciated you looking out for the kid.”

*Oh my.* That smile was... Well, Molly felt herself getting warm. Mr. Barker’s—*Ash’s* smile was remarkable; it made him less intimidating, much more approachable. And entirely too handsome by half. Molly had never allowed herself to notice how attractive a man may or may not be, determined to remain focused on her goal of supporting her sisters... and if she *had* noticed anyone, it certainly wouldn’t have been a man so large and hairy and daunting. But that smile was *definitely* noticeable, even though it’d been there and gone in a flash. It made him... well, it made him downright handsome.

She thought she might have nodded, and he politely continued. “And what brings you to Cheyenne, Miss Murray?”

His voice was low, and made her want to shiver. She told herself to quit being a ninny, lifted her chin, and forced herself to focus on what he was saying. “I’m looking for a job. I don’t suppose you know of anyone who is looking to hire a cook, or possibly a baker? Any restaurants or bakeshops?” She couldn’t help the hopeful twinge in her voice.

Ash looked over at Nate, who shook his head. Turning back to her, he said in that deliciously low voice, “No ma’am, sorry. But then, we don’t come into town much more than once a month, so we wouldn’t know about any openings. I’m sure you’ll find what you need, though.” He flashed that smile again, and Molly’s eyes went wide. Heavens, he was disarmingly attractive when he did that.

And so she was a little rattled when she nodded distractedly and

extracted herself from their company as quickly as possible. It was her first day in her new hometown. She needed all of her wits about her to find a job to sustain them through the winter. She certainly didn't need to be distracted by the memory of Nate's brother's flustering smile.

Still, she was grinning as she stepped out onto the sidewalk and adjusted her hat, determined to find her place in this bustling town.

By late that afternoon, however, her optimism had dwindled. It seemed that there was just a limited number of options available to a young, unmarried woman, even here in such a large town. Why, some of the people she'd inquired had even suggested that she apply at one of the local whorehouses! She was utterly appalled, but had run into that attitude in Omaha and North Platte. She'd hoped, however, that because Cheyenne was larger, there would be more opportunities. She'd give it another day or so of looking, but she was becoming disheartened.

Why was it so difficult for people—men, especially—to employ a young woman? There were women her age who worked as maids in grand households, and she was even willing to take such a job, if she could find it. But what she really wanted was to be employed as a cook.

She *loved* to cook, to bake especially. Cookery was like a big puzzle, and each way she figured out to combine ingredients resulted in new and interesting meals. Her mother had been an amazing cook, and had taught Molly well, even before her remarriage to a baker. Miles Murray had accepted both mother and daughter, and they helped him build his bake shop into a grand success. When Molly had been nine, her mother gave birth to Wendy, and Molly had finally had the little sister she'd coveted.

The four of them had been happy enough; they worked hard, even little Wendy, to make Papa's shop successful. It had been the happiest years of Molly's young life, working beside her stepfather, learning new ways to create delicate morsels of sugary heaven and thick, heavy rolls and everything in between. She'd often wondered if she'd only thrown herself into his interests to gain his attention, but she'd quickly come to appreciate her own talent and love of baking.

And then, when she'd been fifteen, and ready to start thinking about her future as a wife and mother, her own mother had died shortly after bringing another baby girl into the world. She'd miscarried several times, and this last pregnancy had taken its toll. Little Annie was weak and fragile, and not expected to last longer than her mother, but she did. Molly and Papa had to work long hours at the bakery, and Wendy helped take care of the baby. But at three years old, Annie caught the German Measles from a neighbor boy, and

passed it to her sisters. They all recovered, but the high fever had left precious, delicate Annie mostly deaf.

Even then, Molly hadn't been sure if Papa could handle such a blow, not with his struggle to support his daughters and his bakery. Those years had not been easy, and they grew harder still, when the Great Chicago Fire took their father and livelihood away. Annie had been sick, and Molly was home tending her, the day the bakery went up in flames. Papa hadn't escaped.

The three of them coped as well as they could, but Wendy, at ten, was too young to work, and Molly had to keep her well-supplied with the books she loved and the medicine Annie always seemed to need. She'd spent four long years cooking breakfasts and luncheons at a hotel, and fending off the advances of the male guest. She'd been let go several months before after an altercation with a guest who grew angry when she didn't want to accommodate his baser desires. Without references, she'd been unable to find another job in Chicago. They had enough money saved to pay two more month's rent for Wendy and Annie, and Molly's journey to find work elsewhere. She'd hoped that someplace among the cities of the West, where society was just forming, she'd be able to find work doing what she loved.

But no, it seemed that even here, she was going to have a difficult time earning money. There were plenty of female cooks, but they were all old enough to be someone's grandmothers, and looked it too. Molly briefly wondered if she became fat and jolly, would that help her gain the work she wanted? Apparently the only thing someone of her age was good for was marriage—or more unsavory arrangements.

Molly would not be marrying, not just to find a place in the world. She knew she was too tall, too large all over, to appeal to a man. Why, she was taller than many of the men she saw in the street, and she was used to the stares. Her mother had been tall, and her father must have been even taller, because she often met men she thought she could lift under one arm. No, there'd be no marriage for her, and no whoring either.

She'd find a job! She had to.

She'd originally thought to focus on only those establishments selling food, but after multiple rejections she started asking at every storefront, in case they were hiring help. Most turned her down immediately, but the pause some store clerks gave before shaking their heads told her that they might have been hiring, but wouldn't hire *her*.

The last establishment, a storefront that apparently sold leather goods—as if Molly had any idea what to do with leather after it came off the cow!—had been like that. And now there was only one more left on this street, before she crossed to the next. It had been a long

day, with the wind biting through her jacket, plucking at her bonnet and pulling at her simple arrangement of curls. She was tired, and wanted to return to the hotel to nurse a cup of tea and sulk; but she had to press on, to find a place for the winter.

She stopped in front of the final store, to read the large billboard announcing “Jn. A. Bullard and Sons’ Dry Goods”. She sighed briefly, and then straightened her back, plastered a polite smile on her face, and pushed through the door, making the little bell tinkle happily.

The whole place was decorated for Christmas, and Molly felt a pang of regret. They hadn’t truly celebrated Christmas since the Fire, and it hadn’t been the same since Mama had passed away. But just the smell of the boughs hanging from the rafters and the cinnamon tucked between the holly berries lifted her spirits. It was a hopeful sign, a happy sign. Maybe this year would be the one, after all, in which her sisters were able to celebrate Christmas. Did they even remember how to celebrate?

A smaller voice wondered; did she?

### **Chapter 3**

Ash passed his brother another tin of peaches. Nate frowned at it, but tucked it into the basket he carried anyway. Ash couldn’t blame him; he was getting sick of canned food too. The two of them had a long conversation over breakfast that morning, and Ash figured they’d reached an accord. They’d stopped arguing at least, and seemed to be taking steps to forgive and forget. Nate had been almost surprised to witness Ash’s anger at his departure, but then got defensive. It took a good long while for the damn fool to figure out that Ash was so angry because he’d been terrified of the things that could have happened to Nate, alone in Cheyenne. His younger brother shut up after that.

It was then that Ash realized he’d never told Nate that he was more than just some kid he’d taken care of all those years. Ash viewed Nate as his brother, and loved him. And so, in a conversation as awkward as anything either had experienced, he’d told Nate that. And now they were pretending that conversation—and the argument that had preceded the whole thing—had never happened. They were back to their companionable silences, and being able to communicate entire conversations with just a word or two. After years of living together, Ash hadn’t realized how attuned they were to each other, until the rift formed. It was nice to have his kid brother back.

It’d been after noon by the time they got all that worked out, and it’d be silly to head out into the weather that late in the day, when it’d be well after dark when they got home. So they opted to spend another night in town, and spend the afternoon running errands. Ash

stopped in to let Doc Sanderson check out his arm, and now they were doing some shopping. They had to replenish the dry goods they were eating through so quickly, and Ash knew that they were eating through his savings at the same rate. Nate left him at the pallets of canned foods, and went to go ogle the candy selection.

Bullard's place was all decked out for the season, but Ash didn't pay the decorations much attention. He never really had, not being one to make a big deal out of Christmas. He hadn't done anything to celebrate until Nate came along, and since then their only celebration had been to head into town—weather permitting—for the Christmas sermon and a good meal. But Nate seemed interested in the festive decorations, and Ash wondered if the kid was looking to do up their place likewise.

He was mulling over the collection of ready-made clothes, hoping his backup long johns would make it through another season, when a gust of wind and the tinkling of the door chimes heralded another customer's arrival. Old man Bullard was in the back, checking on his selection of jerky for Ash. There was no one else to take the newcomer's order, and Ash figured they'd leave again soon enough.

So when he rounded the table and moved on to the next aisle, the last thing he expected was to come face-to-face with a weary-looking Miss Molly Murray. The crisp gray wool outfit she'd looked so fine in that morning was bedraggled, with slush around the hem. Her hair was coming loose from the bun she'd fashioned, and those little wispy curls floating at her temples and base of her neck made her more approachable.

And Ash very much wanted to approach her. As someone who'd spent his life happily secluded on his ranch, he was surprised to discover how much he wanted to get to know Miss Murray. She was beautiful, and obviously had guts. Coming all this way from Chicago—Nate had told him she didn't know anything about the west—had been brave, but then standing up to him when he was so angry? That'd really impressed him, even if he hadn't let her ire distract him from saying his piece to his wayward brother.

She was brave, alright, but particularly fine-looking too. He didn't have much use for most women, them being so much smaller than him. He'd been with a few here and there, but always worried he'd hurt them. And well-brought-up young ladies took one look at him, with his height and breadth, and what Nate called his "scary face", and crossed the street rather than pass by him.

But Miss Molly Murray was another matter. She had the guts to yell at him, *and* she came up past his chin. Why, he wouldn't have to bend down very far at all to kiss her, and he'd been thinking *that* more than once since they officially met this morning. She wasn't rail-thin,



either, like some of the young misses in town. No, she had enough to her that he knew she wouldn't blow over in a stiff breeze, and that she'd be a handful for any man lucky enough to bed her. Exactly the kind of woman Ash enjoyed looking at.... and kissing, come to think of it.

She had thick brown hair, and wide brown eyes that reminded him of hot coffee with fresh milk. And Lord help him, she had dimples that showed up in her round cheeks at even the slightest smile. He'd always liked dimples.

Yep, Molly Murray could surely disrupt his way of life, if he let her. And he found that he just didn't care.

So he was smiling when he bobbed his head in greeting. "Howdy, ma'am. Have any luck today?"

Her shoulders slumped further. "No, nothing. Not a single establishment in this town appears to be hiring cooks, or even a maid or stockgirl. I am perfectly capable, despite my age, but no one seems to be willing to give me the chance!" He liked the way she forced her back straight again, and stuck out her chin stubbornly. "I want to ask at this store; perhaps the owner needs seasonable help?"

Ash shook his head. "Sorry ma'am. Old man Bullard has three sons, two daughters, and a daughter-in-law. He and his wife have plenty of help around the store."

She sighed, and for one moment the determined mask slipped, and he caught sight of the despair and hopelessness in her eyes, before she plastered a small grin back onto her face. "Well, then, I'll cross this establishment off my list. I believe I have time to ask in a few more stores, before it's fully dark."

Not ready to let her leave yet, Ash said, "What kind of work are you willing to do?"

"Anything, really. I've the most experience with baking, but I'm an excellent cook, and love to do it. I can work as a maid, or seamstress, or wait on customers."

And suddenly, Ash was struck with the perfect solution to his problems. He needed another set of hands out on the ranch, and she needed some kind of work. "How about housekeeping?"

"I've been keeping my own house since I was sixteen. Why, do you know anyone who needs a housekeeper?" Her eyes had lit up with excitement, and those dimples were back. There was no way Ash was going to disappoint her now.

"We could use some help out at the ranch." Her mouth formed a little "oh" of surprise, and he hurried through his explanation. "I busted my arm pretty badly about a month ago. Doc Sanderson had to actually cut it open to reset it, and he says I can't use it again for at least another month. We've been scraping by, but the house is a mess,

and,” he glanced around, making sure his brother was out of earshot, “Nate can’t cook for sh—” He cleared his throat. “He can’t cook very well.” When she started worrying her lower lip, thinking about his offer, he continued. “I can’t promise the job’d be much good past the thaw, because I should be healed up by then. But if you’re looking for a place to spend the winter, we could use an extra hand. In fact, I’m not sure if we’ll make it through the winter without someone else out there to help.”

She was quiet for a long minute, and he found himself holding his breath. She was idly stroking the material under her hand, and staring at his chin. Finally, she met his eyes. “Would I have my own room?” Ash nodded. They could rearrange the loft, and hang up a quilt or two for privacy. “So room and board are included. Hmmm.” Another long thoughtful pause. “What salary are you offering?”

Ash swallowed. He didn’t rightly know what housekeepers were paid. “Listen, I can pay you, but this arm has cost me a lot.” His years hunting buffalo had made him a pile of money, and his way with the wild mustangs they caught and trained had made him wealthier still. But he’d had to use a lot of his savings over the last month, paying for goods they wouldn’t normally have to buy. “But if you’re getting room and board, what kind of salary are you expecting?”

She watched her draw herself up, all business now that negotiations were underway. “Enough to pay the rent at a boarding house in town for my sisters.”

Ash was so surprised, he snuck a glance behind her, looking for these sisters she claimed to have. She must have seen him do it, because she actually smiled. She looked like she might have been laughing at him, and he didn’t mind one bit. He was too busy enjoying the way those plump cheeks dimpled and those coffee-brown eyes lit up.

“My sisters are still in Chicago, but will be joining me here shortly. That’s why I needed to find a job so quickly. We’re interested in making a new start, so I came out first to make sure I could support them.”

“How many sisters are we talking about, here?”

Another one of those smiles, and he found himself smiling back. “Wendy is thirteen, and Annie is seven. Truthfully, I’m uncomfortable with the idea of leaving Annie here in Cheyenne while I’m at your ranch. She— isn’t well.” Why the hesitation there? “But your offer is the only one I’ve received all day—the only respectable offer, that is—so I shouldn’t turn it down.”

“What Annie has isn’t catching, is it?” Molly shook her head, and he shrugged. “Well, bring them along too.”

Her eyes snapped up to meet his in disbelief. He almost winced.

He was a man who valued his privacy, but they needed help on the ranch, at least through the winter. Things were precarious enough that he'd gladly take on three more mouths, if it meant they could work to keep themselves alive. Besides, he'd get to have the fascinating Miss Murray on hand. So he nodded. "If you three can share a room, and you're willing to take room and board for all of you in exchange for an outrageous salary, I'll hire you."

There was barely any hesitation when she stuck her hand towards him. He wrapped his large hand around hers, and was surprised and pleased to feel the calluses under his fingers. Here was a woman who wasn't afraid of hard work. Exactly the kind he admired.

"You have yourself a deal, Mr. Barker."

Nate chose that time to show back up, carrying a new hat. "Whatdya think?" He cocked it over one eye, and struck a manly pose. "Also, what deal?"

"You look like an idiot. And Miss Murray is our new housekeeper."

Nate snatched the hat off his head, and shot Ash a look that asked him if he was serious. Ash nodded, and Nate looked disapproving for a moment, before that wry little grin returned, and he nodded towards Miss Murray. "That's great! It'll be nice to have someone else around for a change."

Ash didn't have to ask what his brother's disapproval was about, he knew. A young, unmarried lady like Molly Murray out on his ranch, all winter? Even if nothing happened between them, the townsfolk would talk. Her reputation would likely be in tatters, and Ash couldn't even make himself care.

He looked down at their hands, still clasped, and was surprised to find his thumb making unconscious circles against the smooth skin on the back of her hand. And she wasn't making any move to pull her hand away, just making small talk with Nate about the ranch. It felt natural to Ash, to be holding her hand like this. To be holding her.

He smiled, and had to chuckle at himself. It got her attention, and he heard the way her breath hitched when she looked up at his face. He didn't know why, but he had his hopes.

"Finish up here, Nate, and tell Bullard to put it on our tab. We're taking Miss Murray out to dinner tonight, to seal the bargain." And he'd get the chance to learn all about his new housekeeper.

## Chapter 4

And thus, the very next afternoon, Molly was on her way to Ash Barker's ranch. She was conflicted about this; part of her thought it rash and dangerous, to take a stranger up on his offer of employment,

and to travel to his home, miles from civilization. But the other part of her—the part that ultimately had won—remembered that during days of searching in other towns, and all day yesterday, she'd been turned down by every shop and establishment. Ash and his brother were the only ones who'd been willing to hire her. And besides, Ash was a little scary-looking at first, but she couldn't deny that she was utterly fascinated by him, and the gentle look in those soft ash-gray eyes. She'd be traveling to his home, and would be seeing him every day. Surely she'd settle into a routine, and her breath wouldn't catch every time she met his eyes?

Dinner the night before had been a revelation. He might be intimidating, but he had a way of setting her at ease, without ever once smiling or cracking a joke, the way most other men did when they wanted a woman to like them. Instead, he asked about her family, about her past, and seemed genuinely interested in her stories. And in return, he answered her questions about the ranch and how the two brothers had become a family.

She saw the way Nate treated him, like an older brother who would never harm him, and grew bold enough to ask after their disagreement the day before. To her surprise, Ash explained part of it, and Nate took up the story after. Neither slighted the other, and both accepted responsibility for their role in the argument. Molly was impressed; how often had she and her sisters bickered, and afterwards refused to see their own stubbornness as the cause?

They'd discussed logistics of her employment, and what supplies they had at the ranch. She asked after their Christmas traditions, and was surprised when they both admitted to having none. When she pushed them, she saw Nate's wistful look, and decided then and there that this Christmas would be special. Wendy and Annie would have their first real Christmas celebration in years, and Nate could experience something every boy should know; the wonder and joy of the holiday season.

This morning she'd rushed to be ready to leave on time. She'd visited the train depot for a schedule, and then sent the girls a telegraph advising them to come to Cheyenne immediately, even including specific travel instructions. Since the telegraph office wouldn't be able to reach her with their reply, she told them she was unreachable, but would be waiting for them at the depot on the afternoon of the seventeenth. If something—such as weather—prevented her from meeting them, they were to secure lodging and leave word at the depot. It was worrisome to someone like her, who liked to have control over situations and a plan for everything, but she knew that Wendy was smart and would make the right decisions. Hopefully, though, they'd all be together by Christmas Eve.

Then she'd gone back to Bullard's Dry Goods, to pick up the items she thought she would need to run a household through the winter. She found herself excited at the prospect of tackling a new and different role; she'd run her own home in the years since her parents had died, but never one so isolated, and never for two strangers. Knowing that her sisters would soon be with her, and that they would be having a real Christmas, was part of her excitement.

At Bullard's she picked through spices, and added more flour, sugar, salt, and other cooking necessities to Ash's tab. She included a big bag of popping corn and a smaller one of cranberries. Both would be delicious, and had the added bonus of being useful as decorations. There was a big spool of red ribbon, and smaller one of white ribbon, and several bundles of cinnamon sticks. She'd use them in cooking, but the spice was always indicative of the season, and she was looking forward to scenting Ash's home with it.

Her new employer showed up as she was looking over the bolts of cloth. He told her he'd picked up enough butter, eggs, cheese, pickles, dried meat and other perishables to last all five of them through the winter, and everything was waiting out front on the sleigh, along with her trunks. Now that he was here, she was almost embarrassed by how much she'd bought with his money, but he politely and impassively started loading her purchases onto the sleigh.

When he'd gone out the door for the last time, she hurried over to the counter with two bolts of cloth she'd picked out. One, a thick blue wool, would make serviceable coats and gloves for her and her sisters, who owned nothing warm enough for a Cheyenne winter. The other bolt was a soft gray cotton that reminded Molly of Ash; she knew it was a silly reason to buy it, but surely she'd be able to make new dresses and underclothes with it as needed.

She was so focused on her inner justifications that she almost didn't notice the clerk, a young woman with a pinched mouth, giving her disapproving glances. Molly didn't have the chance to ask, before the woman said with a raised brow, "Mr. Barker is certainly buying a lot of things for you."

Molly flushed at the implication that Ash was gifting her these things. "I'm his new housekeeper. He merely had me choose the items most necessary for his home."

At the woman's sharp intake of breath, Molly met her eyes and saw the scorn in them. It didn't take long for understanding to dawn; Molly was about to venture into the wild with a strange man and his brother, to live alone on their ranch. Her reputation would be surely ruined.

She resisted the urge to flush in embarrassment and duck her head. Instead, she straightened her back, stuck her chin out, and

reminded herself of her choice. It was her *choice* to come to the west, to search out new opportunities to follow her dream. It was her choice to work hard, and give up the chance at a home of her own, so that her sisters could one day achieve that goal. What did it matter if her reputation was ruined by living with Ash Barker? As long as her sisters had the opportunity to make their own lives, it would be worth it. And besides, it didn't need to be for more than a few months; Ash had said that they couldn't afford to keep her past his arm healing, and then the three Murray sisters could travel on to Salt Lake City, and start new lives again there.

So Molly paid for her cloth with as much dignity as she could muster, and marched from Bullard's with her head held high, and tried to pretend that living with Ash Barker was going to be a sacrifice she willingly made.

The only problem was, the more time she spent in his company, the more she wondered if it was really going to be a sacrifice. The man was courteous and kind in his own taciturn way, and becoming more handsome by the minute. She sat beside him on the ride to his ranch, and while he made no effort to engage her in conversation, he answered her questions honestly and in plenty of detail.

At first, she was distracted enough by the scenery to forget about the niceties of conversation. She'd traveled across the plains by rail, and had seen flatter land... but as Cheyenne receded behind them, she was struck by the *nothingness*. Along the rail, there'd been small towns or depots. Out here, for as far as she could see in any direction, there was nothing but snow-covered scrub, with hills in the distance. But strangely, she liked it. She could see the lonely beauty in it, and admired the kind of person who could make a home out here.

She hadn't even been on the sleigh for an hour when she realized that the winter coat she wore wasn't going to be sufficient protection from the Cheyenne winter. Ash saw her rub her legs to warm them, and without a word, pulled a buffalo robe forward and draped it over her lap. It was cozier than she could have imagined, but didn't help her shoulders, which were just as chilled. She inched closer to him, drawn by his heat, and stopped only when their shoulders touched. It was such a small thing—such an inappropriate thing!—but his touch made her warm all over, and she finally sighed in contentment.

Nate picked his way behind the sleigh, allowing the larger horse pulling the vehicle to tamp down more of the snow for his animal. But by turning slightly, Molly was able to carry on a conversation, and discovered more about the outgoing, gregarious young man. She discovered that his mother had been following the railroad as it was built, earning her keep various ways—Nate had the good grace to blush at this remark—and he didn't know who his rightful pa was.

After she'd died he'd just kept on following the rail-workers, doing whatever odd-jobs he could to stay fed and warm. It had been a hard life on a small child who'd inherited his grandmother's dark skin and hair, and stood out as obviously Indian in a place as prejudiced as the west. When the railroad had reached Cheyenne, he'd gotten into some trouble with a local drunk, and Ash came upon him just in time to halt a deadly beating. When he'd recovered well enough, he decided that he was done with the railroad. Because Ash was the only person who'd ever stuck his neck out for him, Nate decided to find this mysterious man who lived outside of town.

"Goodness!" That was quite a tale. "How old were you?"

Nate didn't have to think long. "Seven, or thereabouts. Ash says I was pretty scrawny, so he never was sure."

Molly thought about a child Annie's age walking all this distance from Cheyenne. "But we've been riding for hours! However did you manage it?"

Nate's hat was pulled down over his forehead and ears, and his collar turned up against the cold, but she could see the sparkle in his eyes, knowing he had her attention. "It's shorter by horse, but probably two days walking. I think it took me about four."

"Four *days*?"

"Yes, ma'am. I remember wishing I'd stolen a horse instead of the food I had. I'd forgotten to take water, though, which is what almost did me in. I was lucky it didn't rain, though, because I was following the tracks Ash'd made on his way back."

The normally silent man spoke up, his rumble startling her. "You were lucky in a lot of ways, back then."

Nate laughed. "I could've run into any number of dangerous animals, or bandits, or wandered off the trail and starved. But I didn't, probably because I was too stupid to be scared."

Molly risked a glance at the man beside her. "And you let him stay, once he found you?"

He shook his head. "He was a half-day from death when I found him, riding fence one afternoon. Spring's a busy time for me, and I couldn't afford to lug him back to town. So I let him stay 'til he was better, and then he started doing chores, and then he got more useful, and by the time I had a break, I decided he wasn't so bad to have around."

Nate spoke up again. "Ash didn't like company much back then, but I can be pretty handy to have around. All I knew was that he'd saved me twice—and a few more times since then—and I wasn't going to let him get rid of me, not if I could help it. I started calling myself 'Barker' too, and after that he was pretty much stuck with me."

And so they'd become a family, each the only one the other had.

Their hard work ensured the ranch's success, and they'd become invested in the other's happiness as well. Why, it was such a sweet story, Molly found herself getting weepy just thinking about it, and had to change the subject.

She didn't quite feel like weeping when she first caught sight of the ranch, but it was a close thing. She hadn't known what to expect, but this wouldn't have been it, even if she could guess. The cabin was squat and ugly, made of rough-hewn logs and what looked like mud, although it could be some sort of plaster. There *was* a long porch on the front, that connected to a series of outbuildings—goodness, she'd have to go outside to use the necessary!—and real glass in the windows. But otherwise it was drab and unappealing, and that included the barns. There was a large one where the brothers said the horses were stabled, the ones that hadn't been sold off in the fall. And the smaller, farther one held the equipment. Ash dropped her and her trunks off on the porch before turning the sleigh in that direction.

It gave her a moment to survey her new temporary home. From the porch, she had to change her perspective. The view was actually quite stunning, with the unbroken snow-covered hills and distant mountains. The barns and outbuildings even looked rather quaint, once she saw them from the porch. Feeling a little better about the ranch, she went inside.

Ash had obviously devoted his attention to the inside of his home, rather than the outside. The house was small, but comfortable, and full of little touches that showed the man had lived there for many years. On their long ride to the house, Ash had explained—in answer to her question—that he'd built the house back when Cheyenne was Crow Creek Crossing, and only a few dozen people lived there. He used to hunt for the army base at Laramie, and spent his winters in solitude here, improving his home. When Nate arrived, they'd added an extra room together.

There was a kitchen area to her left; not a separate room, like she was used to, but divided from the main room by the kitchen table. She was thrilled to discover it had most of the modern conveniences she was used to, which would make her job much easier. There were two long counters, with cabinets above and below, and a deep wash basin. Two windows, on either side of the stove, would provide plenty of light and ventilation, if it ever got warm enough to warrant opening them. The stove itself was wood-burning, which shouldn't surprise her, but had an actual Auxiliary Air-Chamber, a new invention that would make baking much easier.

The main room had a large fireplace along the back wall, and a heavy mantel above it. There were two comfortable chairs placed in front of it on a beautiful braided rug, and a small table between them.



The back door stood directly opposite the front, and there were two closed doors off either side of the main room; Molly assumed those were the brothers' bedrooms. A small staircase led up the back wall to a loft that covered half the main room. From where she stood she couldn't see anything up there.

The house was simple, but messy. There were dishes piled in the sink and on the table, and dust on the surfaces that didn't see much use. Ash hadn't been joking when he said his arm had seriously hampered his housekeeping abilities. But it wasn't anything a few hours with a broom and rag couldn't fix, and suddenly, Molly was *excited* to start this new adventure. Yes, she'd left behind everything she knew, and had traveled halfway across the country, and had accepted a job she'd never considered... but wasn't it all thrilling? She resisted the urge to spin around the room, but couldn't help the big smile that spread across her face. She was going to make sure this house stayed neat and orderly, and her new employers were well-fed, and she'd make a home for her sisters. And, by God, they were all finally going to have the Christmas they deserved.

The next morning Ash woke up to the smell of flapjacks. It took him a bit to figure that one out, since it'd never happened before. He'd lived alone for so long, and now Nate waited for him to wake up and get breakfast going. Hell, usually he had to prod the kid out of bed; it wasn't like he was likely to get up first and make flapjacks.

Ash was halfway to the door before he remembered that he'd hired a housekeeper, the intriguing Miss Murray. No, she'd given him permission to call her Molly, now, although he doubted that wisdom. It was probably safer to keep calling her 'Miss Murray', to keep some space between them. It might have been smarter, but for some reason he didn't think with his brain around her. What other excuse did he have for inviting a virtual stranger into his home for the whole winter? Especially such an appealing stranger, who was bringing two more kids along, as well? It was possibly one of the stupidest decisions he'd made, and he couldn't be happier about it.

Thinking about Molly reminded him that she probably wouldn't appreciate him barging into the main room wearing just a pair of long johns. At least his arm had healed enough for him to dress himself, though, and he struggled into a pair of jeans and pulled a shirt on. He could button it all the way up if he *had* to, but it was much easier to just leave the top few undone. Still, he was focused on the lower buttons when he padded barefoot into the main room.

The first thing he noticed was the fire, cheerful and cozy in the hearth. He and Nate rarely lit a fire in the morning, until the coldest part of the season, making do with extra layers. They just didn't have the inclination to set it, light it, and then bank it while they worked

out in the barn during the day. But seeing it lit, spilling cheery light and delicious warmth through the room, reminded him of why he'd always liked the coldest part of the winter. It was special, the way a house and holding could wrap around a man, the snow itself cushioning him from the outside world, leaving him as an island of warmth and contentment.

And the cause of that unexpected contentment was bustling around the kitchen, a long apron over her dressing gown, her hair in a loose braid down her back. It was curlier than he'd guessed, having only seen it up in a bun, and he was impressed she'd managed to contain it all. In fact, he was impressed by a lot of things when it came to Molly Murray, not least of which was how delicious she looked while fixing him flapjacks. She looked like she came straight from bed.

Thinking about her in bed had kept him up late the night before. By the time they'd gotten the horses settled, and the mustangs run, and her trunks inside, it was late. She'd already straightened up the main room and the kitchen, and it looked nicer than it had since... well, probably since before Nate had moved in. He knew she must have been exhausted by her early morning and the cold ride, but she'd still attacked the mess with a wet towel, and even had a spot of dirt on her cheek. He just barely resisted the urge to wipe it off.

The night before, they had a quiet supper of leftovers the hotel had sent along, and then took Molly up to the loft to inspect it. It was dustier than he'd remembered—it hadn't really been used since they built Nate his own room years ago—but she said she'd set it to rights soon enough. Nate had managed to dig out the old bed Ash'd made for him when he'd first arrived; it was a shorter version than the full-sized bed the kid slept in now, and they'd stuck the old one up in the loft and forgot about it. It was too short for Molly, but assuming her sisters weren't as tall as her, it might work for them. For now, he helped Nate pull the featherticking off the rope frame and lay it on the wooden floor for Molly, and dug out a bunch of quilts for her to use. She'd thanked them profusely, told them she'd be able to make do, and shooed them downstairs.

He'd said goodnight to her, and then lay there in bed thinking about her sleeping upstairs, wondering what he'd gotten himself in to. He couldn't help but remember the way she'd cuddled up next to him on the sleigh, and how hard it'd been not to reach his arm around her to pull her closer. If his other arm hadn't been in the sling, and had been able to hold the reins, he might have given in to the temptation. To keep her warm, of course.

The woman was all kinds of temptation, with those big brown eyes, and deep dimples, and breasts—he'd tried not to stare when he'd

seen her without the coat—that could keep a man busy for hours. She was big all over, and matched him perfectly. Having her here with him on the ranch, no ‘proper society’ to keep him in check, it was only a matter of time before he kissed her, to see how perfectly they *did* match.

This morning, sitting down at the table and having her lay a plate of fresh flapjacks in front of him, he decided that he was pretty damn pleased with himself for hiring her. And when she’d ladled some of the sugary syrup out of the warming pot onto his stack of ‘jacks, he just about crowed with pleasure. He was thinking he didn’t mind being pampered, and maybe he wouldn’t push his arm to heal all that fast.

The sun wasn’t even up behind the cabin when Nate peeked out of his bedroom, his suspicious gaze easing into a smile when he saw it was Molly making breakfast. He’d taken the time to pull on his boots before coming out, but was still buttoning up his shirt. That fact didn’t seem to faze Molly; but when *Ash* had walked into the room, her eyes fixed on the dark curls peaking from beneath the flannel, and her blush had been fierce. It made him warm, to catch her staring at him.

She joined them for breakfast, after he’d insisted, and they talked about plans for the day. She was hoping to have time to straighten the loft for her and her sisters, and he told her to just go ahead and do that first. He’d been a bit embarrassed by its state yesterday, and would be happier if he knew she had a decent place of her own. He promised to send Nate up with some nails and a small rope, to stretch across the front, so she could hang up some quilts for privacy. She thanked Ash with a smile, and he discovered that he’d happily do chores to make her smile again.

She’d asked about their habits and eating schedule on the ranch. Since there was rarely anyone there but the two of them, they’d settled into a rut, and she was happy enough to join them. They woke up with the sun, unless there was a reason to get up earlier, and made breakfast after their morning chores. Molly seemed thrilled to discover those included milking the cow and collecting eggs, so she’d have those fresh for breakfast.

After breakfast they’d head out to the barns and whatever tasks they had for the day. There was a lot less to do on the ranch in the winter; in the spring there was the big push to catch wild horses, and in the autumn they sold the previous year’s work. Most of their horses went to the army at Fort Laramie, but they were gaining a reputation in Cheyenne as providers of fine horseflesh. During the winter they had a much lower stock, and less to do. They spent their time on all the fix-it projects they were too busy to tackle during the year. During the coldest part of the season, sometimes they only left the house a

few times a day to check on the horses, and otherwise spent their time inside. Usually during January or so, Ash would clear out some space in the back part of the main room, and start his building projects; the furniture in the room, and the house itself in some aspects, were a result of his tinkering during the cold months.

They tended to like their big meal towards the end of the afternoon, with a big breakfast making them last 'til then. Molly was happy to oblige their preferences, and promised that since she'd spent four years cooking breakfasts for hotel guests in Chicago, they'd be pleased with her selections. They left for the barn with her deep in consideration over planned meals.

Dinner that first day didn't appear remarkable at first glance—just a beef stew and some bread—but Ash changed his opinion after his first bite. Damn, but the woman could *cook*. She'd taken ingredients that he'd used hundreds of times before, and even spices that he'd recognized, and combined them in some way that tasted new and interesting. It tasted the way he imagined a real, home-cooked meal would taste, even though he didn't have anything to compare it to. He'd been dumped at the orphanage in St. Louis so young that he didn't remember whatever home he might have had, and then he'd lit out for the western territories as soon as he was able. But this meal tasted like something someone's mother might make.

Which is when Ash gave up on thinking of Molly as his housekeeper, and started wondering if she'd be amenable to something more permanent. When she first stood up to him in the street, trying to protect Nate, Ash had been intrigued. He rarely met a woman as tall and sturdy-looking as she was, and definitely not one who would could stand up to him. Then, when he got to know her, he was intrigued by her determination and her unexpected softness. He offered her the job because she needed it, and because they needed another set of hands out on the ranch. It was a purely logical decision to have her work for them, and he tried to convince himself that his attraction to her made no difference. And now he found himself thinking that having her around his house all the time might be pretty nice. He valued his privacy, but he was finding that he valued the way she made him feel even more. Hell, he'd only known the woman a few days, and he was thinking about asking her to stay past the winter?

It took another few days before he admitted the truth; he was seriously thinking about asking her to stay forever.

## Chapter 5

By her second week on the ranch, Molly felt at home. And not just 'at home' because she knew where everything was, or because

she'd cleaned everything she could reach, or because she had been granted complete control over the kitchen. No, she really and truly felt like she was home. She felt more 'at home' here in this simple house than she had since they'd lost their townhome to creditors after the fire. The apartment she'd shared with her sisters had never been more than a place to collapse after a long day's work, and had never been filled with the smiles and laughter the ranch was.

Who would have thought it? Her first sight of Ash Barker had scared her; he'd been big and burly and so... so *manly*, striding down the street in anger. But she had no reason to be scared of him. The man was startling at first glance, certainly, but he was kind to her, and had a gentleness in his eyes that she found herself contemplating more than necessary. Certainly, the man was reserved, but not somber; he had a great, booming laugh that had startled her the first time she'd joined in Nate's joking. And Ash's smiles? *Whew!* They were... well, they made her feel *quite* warm, for some reason.

She spent her days in the house, but Ash didn't seem to mind when she joined them in the barn to visit the horses. She wasn't fond of the large animals, but when she saw how well Ash and Nate had trained them, she grew less nervous. Still, she didn't venture out often, mainly because of the weather. For some reason, it seemed so much colder in Cheyenne than in Chicago. Nate laughed when she mentioned it, and told her it was probably because there were no tall buildings around to block the wind. Her first task, after cleaning the house and fixing up the loft, had been to start cutting the thick blue wool. While she would have liked a new coat herself, she knew she needed to get one made for Annie before the delicate little girl arrived. She'd never had anything worse than the German Measles, but she was so frail that she seemed to attract every cold that came her way. Molly couldn't recall the last time she'd seen her sister not sniffing into a handkerchief.

She was careful not to neglect her employers for her sewing, though. She'd been flattered by their praise of her first dinner, and recognized that she'd impressed Ash. But when she presented them with her first dessert, a simple sweet potato pie, she didn't quite understand the look that came to Ash's face. He was staring at the fireplace, but not really looking at it, not even chewing the bite he'd taken off his fork. When she'd asked him if it tasted alright, he'd hastily swallowed and nodded. His grin looked forced, though, and he looked at her oddly for the rest of the meal.

Since that dinner, and their reactions, she'd put extra effort into making their meals delicious, focusing on the foods and flavors she was coming to know that they liked. Nate, for instance, was more adventurous with his tastes, while Ash was suspicious of anything he

hadn't tried before. So far, he'd liked everything 'new' she'd prepared, but she was taking it slow; she'd save the fancy French sauces for later in the winter.

Besides cooking and her sewing, and the less-frequent chores like laundry and soap-making, she needed to keep the house neat. She'd gotten permission to enter their bedrooms, and keep them tidy. Ash didn't leave her anything to do except dust; his room was minimalistic and orderly, with one dresser only half-full of clothes, a night stand and oil lamp, and the largest bed she'd ever seen. On her first foray into the room, it had intimidated her enough that she'd left almost immediately. But on the second day, she noticed the way his blankets were piled around the footboard, and crossed the room to make the bed properly. She supposed that he couldn't do it with only one arm, and so she made his bed for him every morning, the way she'd been taught as a girl. He never said anything, but she liked to imagine that she was making his life a little easier.

Nate's room, on the other hand, was a disaster area! The boy didn't seem to use his dresser at all, preferring instead to pile his clothing up on the backs of one of two chairs, or over the bookshelf stacked high with tools, nick-knacks, and a few books that looked like they'd been read many times. It felt wrong to be sorting through a young man's treasures, but she'd been hired to clean, and so she did. When he saw what she'd done, he grinned unrepentantly, and hugged her with a cheeky "Thanks, Molly!" She'd blushed, and thereafter unconsciously treated the boy more like a younger sibling than an employer.

They both continued to enjoy her baking, and she put extra effort into making them daily little treats, knowing that they hadn't had them in a while. Nate seemed to like whatever she made, but Ash particularly liked her cookies. So one afternoon, when she'd pulled an absolutely *perfect* batch of sugar cookies out of the oven, she decided that he needed to taste them now, when they were crisp on the outside and soft in the middle. So she bundled some of them into a towel, threw on her shawl, and ducked outside.

The sun was bright, and the glare off the snow caused her to squint. But she was glad for the slight warmth it provided; she didn't even need to cover her head, but just draped the thick wool shawl around her shoulders. Of course, it was still cold enough for the slush to have iced over, but it wasn't as frigid as it could be on days without the sun. She held on to the rail as she picked her way carefully down the front steps, but then she was able to hurry towards the barn. In her time here, she'd been outside enough to see the beauty in the simplicity of the buildings, and what she initially thought was stark, she now appreciated as utilitarian.

She came around the side of the barn, and stopped short at the sight of him in the corral. Ash was working with a large horse, whose coat was as as his hair, his shirt unbuttoned clear down to his naval, and his sleeves rolled up. She could see the sweat clinging to his temples from where she stood, as she watched him chase the animal and yell out commands. He didn't try to mount the horse, or use any tack. He appeared to be training it with just his hand and his voice.

Molly thought it was the most magnificent thing she'd ever seen. *He* was the most magnificent man she'd ever seen. He was more than a match for the big horse, and she drifted over to the fence to watch him.

The sun must have become warmer, to account for her sudden flush, and the way her palms were sweating. It probably also accounted for the warmth in her belly and across her chest. She sighed, dreamily, content to lean on the upper rail and watch him all day.

Ash wasn't sure how long she'd been standing there, but he felt her gaze between his shoulder blades, and when he turned, there was his housekeeper watching him. She didn't often come out to the outbuildings, and Ash assumed it was because she saw the house as her domain and the barns as his. But here she was, looking downright sexy with that windblown hair and pink cheeks. She was watching him with a dreamy look, and he had to grin. What *was* it about this woman that made him smile so much?

He dismissed the yearling with a firm word and a fond slap on the rump, and the animal moved to the far side of the corral. Ash ambled towards her, wondering why she was there.

She didn't say anything to him when he joined her at the fence, resting his elbows on the rail next to hers. Their faces were only inches apart, and she was slow to realize that. When she did, she straightened hurriedly, and her fluster pleased him. He was beginning to suspect that Molly Murray might be as attracted to him as he was to her.

She could cook like a chef, kept his home orderly, could lend a hand out in the barn when necessary, and looked like a goddess. What more could a man want? He'd been thinking more seriously about asking her to stay on the ranch, which would mean marriage. Whereas even two months ago that thought would have made him cringe, thinking he was satisfied with the way things stood, he was now realizing that Molly was the perfect partner for him.

And he aimed to prove it to her.

"Howdy, ma'am. Just thought you'd come out to say hello?"

She flushed, but didn't look away. He liked that forwardness about her. It showed that she was strong enough to survive out here in

the Cheyenne nothingness. Still, her stammer was endearing. "I... uh... made cookies." She held up a bundle, and then quickly broke eye contact to open it up.

He smiled, again, at the top of her head, his pleasure at her visit divided between the prospect of her baking and her own presence.

In fact, he was so focused on her that he barely appreciated the absolute delight of biting into the sugar cookie she handed him. She took one for herself, and he couldn't help but stare at the pink tongue that darted out to lick crumbs from those perfect lips.

"These are really good, Molly. Thanks."

She smiled slightly, still looking flustered. "I'm glad you like them. They came out so well, I thought you should have a few now, rather than after dinner."

She'd missed some crumbs, there on her chin. He couldn't seem to stop himself from reaching out to brush them away, with one callused thumb. She didn't seem to mind his touch, and was that a shiver he saw right before she closed her eyes? "You spoil us, Molly."

She was slow to regain her control. "You deserve it. You work so hard, and cookies are the least I can do."

"It's been real nice having you around. Not just for your cookies, either." She blushed, but was smiling. It made him want to kiss her.

In fact, he was leaning in towards her when he realized what he was doing, and slowing straightened. He didn't want to push her, to frighten her. He was finding that he wanted to taste her—taste the sugar cookies on her lips—more than he'd wanted anything in the past. But he also didn't want to overwhelm her.

She was holding her breath, and that realization made her even more appealing. Maybe she was willing to be overwhelmed...?

He didn't want to rush things, but he couldn't stop himself from touching her. He ran the fingers of his good hand down her cheek, feeling the dimple under his fingers as she smiled. "...Real nice."

"I've... I've enjoyed being here. You've welcomed me. Made me feel almost like part of your family. That's been very nice."

"Well, we think of you as part of our family. I want you to feel at home here." He wanted her to *be* at home here on his ranch, but hadn't quite figured out how to ask her.

"I do." Her whispered confession made his heart leap, and a small grin pull up the corners of his lips.

He'd do it. He'd ask her to marry him. To stay here and be his partner and part of his family and make his home complete.

She must have seen something in his face, because her breath hitched again, and she straightened suddenly.

"I have to... dinner shouldn't be left to burn." Was her hand shaking, when she tucked an errant curl behind her ear? He wanted to



believe that his touch had flustered her.

He nodded slowly, watching her, thinking how nice she looked there in the afternoon sun. She sure looked like she belonged here. With him.

She left him the bundle of cookies, and he promised himself that he'd take them into the barn to share with Nate, right after he finished watching her walk away. He leaned there on the fence, munching on a perfect cookie, enjoying the way her dress swung around her bottom. She looked back at him twice, and both times he saw her smile.

Yep, Molly Murray was the woman for him.

## Chapter 6

Molly was... *happy*. Happier than she could remember being, at least since her mother died. Happier than she thought she had a right to be, living a life so different from what she'd always assumed. She was a little disturbed to discover how easily she was forgetting her dream of opening a bakery, and thinking about how nice it was to run a household, instead. She'd just always assumed that she'd open a bakery, like Papa, and that's what she'd been working towards for so many years. But now she was questioning if that's what she really wanted.

She liked being here, stuck out in the middle of nowhere with two men who were no longer strangers. She liked Nate's irreverence and Ash's patience and heated glances; she liked *them*. They made her feel like she was part of their family, and that was... well, that was a lovely feeling. She liked mealtimes the best, when they would linger over her creations, and their praises made her feel warm. If they didn't have any pressing concerns, they would talk until the fire burned down; she best loved hearing stories about the lives they'd carved out of the Cheyenne wilderness.

Fair's fair, though; she told them all about her life in Chicago, and the bakery she'd run with her stepfather, and the dreams she'd had that burned in the Great Fire. She'd missed Papa after his death, of course, but theirs had always been more of a business relationship, each confident in the other's skills and interests, each committed to making the bakery successful. She'd grown to love him for the way he accepted her with her mother, and she'd admired him for his abilities. Molly glossed over the details of his death, but told them how she'd been driven for a long time to open her own bakery or coffee shop. It had been impossible in Chicago, after the creditors took what the fire had left them, but she still had hopes for Salt Lake City.

Ash put down his fork, taking the time to arrange it beside his plate. She found that she liked the deliberate part of his personality, so different from what she'd assumed the first time she'd seen him. He

finished chewing the last of his biscuits and gravy, and pierced her with that soft gray she was finding harder and harder to resist.

“So you figured you’d head out here and open a business?” She nodded. “Five years ago I would’ve called that a dumb idea, but with the railroad bringing folks in all the time, it might’ve worked.”

“That was my thinking, yes. I needed a job to tide me over until I could find a property to lease, and work out an arrangement with a supplier.” She toyed with her biscuit. “I’d thought Cheyenne would have been different from the smaller towns I’d visited along the railroad. But no one was particularly interested in hiring me.” *They kept making lewd suggestions.*

He nodded, as if he could hear her thoughts, and she wondered if maybe he could when he said, “I’ll bet they made some suggestions of where you could get work, and you didn’t like the sound of that, huh?” She blushed and looked away. The topic was entirely unsuitable for discussion with one’s employer, so why did her breath hitch at the knowing look in his eyes?

Nate’s mouth was full when he spoke up. “No one would’ve hired you, and no one would lease you a store, either.”

Molly couldn’t help looking hurt. “Because I’m a woman? I’m perfectly capable, I—”

Ash interrupted in that slow drawl of his, “We know that, Molly. But out here, a woman alone is... well, there’s something wrong there. You know how few marriageable women there are out here?”

“You’re saying I need a husband to find work? To open my own bakery?”

“No.” Ash didn’t look away, and she was disconcerted by the intensity of his gaze. “I’m saying that you need a husband to take care of you, to keep you warm at night, to rely on you to cook and clean and tend house, and to raise his children.” *Oh my.* His words invoked images of her keeping *his* house and raising his children and... *kissing* him. She was almost sure that hadn’t been what he meant, but a girl could dream, couldn’t she? And that’s just what it would be, a dream, but Molly couldn’t stop herself from imagining how it would feel to be held by someone so big and strong and... She sighed.

“...at least, that’s what all those people you asked for jobs were thinking.” He took a big gulp of coffee, but she wondered if she had imagined the twinkling in his eye. After he swallowed, he shrugged nonchalantly. “People in Cheyenne are traditional. They see a young, unmarried woman looking for work, and figure she’s good for marriage or whoring. If you were married, they’d probably happily welcome you as a baker, or whatever. But they’re suspicious of things they’re not used to, and figure you need a husband.”

Molly pursed her lips, trying to think of a way to respond, when

Nate distracted her. "So why don't you? Get a husband, I mean."

Her jaw dropped at the boy's forwardness. "I hardly think—"

"Hey, now!" He held up his fork as if to ward her off. "Don't get upset, I'm just asking." He shrugged. "I mean, Ash's right, there's not a lot of marriageable women out here, and you'd have your pick of men. Especially since you can cook like this." He smiled and took another bite, and despite her discomfort with the topic, she couldn't stay angry at the scamp. Around the food in his mouth, Nate mumbled, "So why don't you just get married, open your bakery?"

She blushed, and looked down at her hands clasped in her lap. She wasn't sure how to explain a debate she'd had with herself, many times. She took a deep breath and started hesitantly. "My stepfather was a good man, and I grew to love him. He was the one who told me I should have my own bakery, and I guess that's why I've worked so hard for it. My mother probably came to love him, I think, but not as much as my real father. She told me once that he'd died before they had a chance to be married, but I'd always wondered..." She sneaked a peek at Ash impassively sipping coffee, and saw that he didn't look scandalized to find that she'd been born out of wedlock. "She raised me by herself, but grew tired of the whispers, and so she married my stepfather to give me a name, and gain respectability. And it worked, but she was never..." Molly sighed, remembering. "She never seemed truly happy. Like she'd settled, just so she could be respectable."

Not able to look at Ash, she responded to Nate, since the boy had been the one to ask in the first place. "I saw them together, and even though Papa was happy, I'd always told myself that I wouldn't settle, wouldn't give up my dream, just because society told me that's what women my age should do." She shrugged and looked down at her hands again. In a smaller voice, she confessed, "It hasn't been too much of a struggle, truthfully. I haven't had much experience with courting."

Nate swallowed audibly, and was very obviously not looking at her when he said, "I dunno. At least you were respectable. You and your sisters had a roof over your heads, and a nice life." His voice was too nonchalant, and Molly remembered too late that he'd been born in a similar circumstance, and his mother hadn't had the chance to marry. He must have been thinking about his young life, so full of prejudice and want, when he shrugged. "Seems to me that her 'settling' for your stepfather worked out okay. For you, at least."

He was right, but then, so was she. "I'm grateful she made the choice she did, but I'm hopeful that I won't ever be put in a situation where settling is the best option."

"What do you mean by 'settling'?" Ash's voice was as soft as his eyes, and she couldn't help but be drawn to him. He was as still as

always; it wasn't the tautness of an animal before a strike, but a relaxed waiting on her answer, as if it was important enough to warrant his full attention.

She felt a little breathless when she replied. "Marrying a man I don't love, who doesn't love me, just because it's proper."

He didn't say anything, but his gaze was warm. Hot, even; she felt like there were little sparks igniting between them, but she couldn't look away. He made her feel safe, and comfortable, and he was sitting across the table just *looking* at her, for goodness' sakes!

Flustered, she broke eye contact and stood up, piling her utensils on her plate and grabbing the biscuit pan. She hurried them over to the sink, trying not to think about how handsome he was, sitting there with the top few buttons of his shirt undone.

But when she came back to the table to take his plate—still not looking at him—his hand on hers stopped her. Startled, she glanced at him, and was again arrested by the spark in those ash-gray eyes. Slowly, without dropping her hand, Ash stood up.

Molly was forced to back up, but her bottom hit the table, and he stepped closer. With nowhere to go, she held her breath, and forced her chin up, not daring to let him see how rattled his close masculinity made her. His thick, dark beard covered the lower half of his face, and made him seem stoic, but she could tell he was smirking under all that hair.

Now that he had her trapped, he slowly lifted his right hand, still holding hers, and brushed it against his lips. Her eyes grew wide and her heart pounded. Was that...? *Was that a kiss?* Did he just *kiss* her fingers?

His voice was low, and they were standing so close she could feel the rumble in his chest. "And if you *did* fall in love, dear Miss Murray?"

And her jaw dropped. Literally dropped, mouth agape. He was *flirting* with her, she was sure of it! Was this what courting was about? Being so breathless at the nearness of a man that she couldn't answer him? Could barely gain enough control to pinch her lips together, so she wasn't standing there like a fish? Wanting nothing more than to push herself closer, to see if he felt as strong as he looked?

She saw the white of his teeth when he smiled. "Because if you *do* fall in love, that wouldn't be settling, and then you could marry. And follow whatever dream your heart desires."

*Oh my.* Molly was beginning to question her dream of opening a bakery, anyhow. It had really been Papa's dream, but she'd been working towards it for so long, it was second-nature to her. But keeping house for Ash and Nate reminded her of her childhood dreams of marriage and a family, and having him this close to her, his

voice causing butterflies to dance around her stomach, was dangerous. She was beginning to wonder if it *would* be settling, to marry a man and keep his house and raise his children.

This man?

She closed her eyes to his gaze, and her lips on a groan. She was *not* falling in love with her employer. She flat-out refused. She was going to survive the winter with her sisters, have a magical Christmas, dammit, and then go to Salt Lake City where she would start a bakery *all on her own* and be happy. And that was final.

Her decision made, she had no idea how to extricate herself from his stimulating nearness. Luckily, Nate came to her rescue.

When she'd been cornered by his brother, she didn't pay attention to the young man, but he'd apparently finished clearing the table. Now he stood at the counter, loudly clearing his throat and holding a basket she'd placed there the evening before.

"What are you doing with all these cranberries, Molly?"

Closing her eyes briefly in prayerful thanks, she hoped her cheeks weren't too red when she slipped away from Ash and hurried to the sink to start washing up. She rolled up the sleeves of her dressing gown, and pulled the apron back over her head. "I've been stringing them together, to make garlands."

"Yeah." She watched from the corner of her eye while he pulled a string of the berries out of the basket, and ran them across his palms. She could feel Ash moving around the table behind her, but refused to turn around. "But why?"

"Why? For Christmas, of course."

"What are they for?"

She hadn't been thinking about the conversation, but his confusion penetrated her thoughts. He didn't know what garlands were for? Slowly, she turned to him, wiping her hands on her apron. "To decorate?" When he showed no signs of understanding, she despaired. What kind of childhood had he had, that he didn't know anything about decorating for Christmastime?

From behind her, Ash's low rumble caused her breath to hitch again. "You know, Nate. Like how Bullard always fancies up his store."

Comprehension dawned on the boy's face. "Oh, with those ribbons!" He held the garland up critically. "These aren't as pretty as his ribbons, but they smell nicer."

Molly was glad now that she'd bought those two rolls of ribbon, and the other gaities. With her sisters arriving in a few days, and with Nate having no experience with the season, she was determined to make this Christmas memorable.

Suddenly excited, she turned to find Ash standing entirely too

close, again. Flustered, but anxious to make her request, she didn't side-step him. "Do you think you'll have some time today to collect pine boughs?"

She could see from his expression that he didn't understand. "I mean, is there any pine growing nearby? In the city sellers brought it in and we bought it from them, but I'm assuming that there is pine growing someplace—"

She could see his small smile when he interrupted her. "You mean, like for a Christmas tree?"

She nodded, excitedly. "Oh yes, a whole tree would be wonderful! And some pine bough for decorating! If you're able to get enough, I could make garlands!"

"How much is 'enough'?"

Pleased that he was considering it, she pursed her lips in thought. "Perhaps another small tree's worth? So, two trees?"

Nate's eagerness made him sound like a little boy. "You mean it, Ash? We're going to have a real Christmas tree?"

Ash flicked his gaze over to his brother, his grin rueful now. "I don't see why not, if Miss Murray is willing to show us what to do with it, and if you're able to do most of the cutting, with my bum arm."

The boy's happy yelp made her want to 'yahoo' as well, but she managed to restrain herself to a simple "Oh, wonderful!" She saw Nate run towards his room, and also wanted to jump with joy, thinking about sharing the holiday with them.

Unable to contain herself completely, she raised one hand and was almost as surprised as Ash when it landed on his chest. His hard, wide chest, which was as warm as she'd imagined it'd be. He was wearing an undershirt beneath the faded blue flannel, but both were unbuttoned low. She'd realized, over the last few days, that while he'd adapted well to using only one arm, there were some tasks—like buttoning the top buttons—that he just couldn't do alone. Unthinking, she reached for those buttons, and started to fasten them. The backs of her fingers brushed against the thick mat of dark hair on his chest, and the tingling reminded her of the way his lips had felt when he'd kissed her hand.

It wasn't until she reached the top button, and saw the pulse beating strongly in the hollow at the base of his neck, that she realized he was holding his breath. Mortified at her forwardness, she risked a peek at his face, and blushed to see his eyes closed. Thanking her lucky stars that he couldn't see her embarrassment at such an intimate act, she quickly stepped away from him, and tried to focus on the dirty dishes.

It was a long moment before she heard him clear his throat, but

his voice still sounded strained. Had she hurt him, somehow? Or was he equally embarrassed for her?

“Nate and I will see what we can do about getting you some trees today, Molly.” She knew she shouldn’t have given him permission to call her by her given name, but couldn’t help the frisson of pleasure that ran through her at the way it sounded on his lips. *Get a hold of yourself, you ninny!*

She thought she nodded, but couldn’t be sure. Then Nate was there, helping his older brother into the thick, sheepskin coat, and they were both pulling their hats down low over their ears. She half-turned to watch them leave the house, relieved and disappointed both that Ash hadn’t said anything further.

She cleaned up from breakfast, lost in her thoughts. She was still in a bit of a daze over what had passed between them, when she took off her apron and realized that she was still in her dressing gown over her nightgown, and her slippers! She felt her cheeks burn, realizing how close Ash had been standing to her, while she was only half-dressed. In a household where she had to wake up and immediately start breakfast, it made more sense to finish dressing afterwards, but still... She was his employee!

She hurried up to her loft to change for the day, and found herself taking special care of her choice of dresses. She chided herself on her silliness, but still took the time to make sure her hair was all crammed into the bun she preferred, and wondered what Ash thought of it.

The mostly complete little blue coat was laid out over the empty bedframe, and she decided to work on it today, after she got supper started. After learning that the men were bringing back trees, Molly knew she had to ready the house for decorating. Perhaps she could do it as early as tomorrow, if she could get the garland strung today. So she’d start a simple stew bubbling, and have time to devote to her sewing and other Christmas projects.

Full of vigor, now that she had a plan for the day, Molly readied the house for Christmas. And if she happened to catch herself staring into space, daydreaming once or twice, what of it? It was the season for dreaming, she was sure, and it probably had nothing to do with her handsome employer. *Probably.*

## Chapter 7

Ash and Nate really didn’t have much to do with the horses, but it was always nice to just spend time with them. Usually in the winter, the two of them got along well enough; Nate’s gregariousness didn’t necessarily conflict with Ash’s preference for quiet. He could appreciate his kid brother’s jokes, and even tease back. But when

things got cramped in the house, as they tended to do right before the spring thaw, one of them would go find something that needed fixing in the barn.

Today, though, they worked quietly together, each intent only on the horses and their exercise. Even in the worst of weather, the brothers managed to let the mustangs outdoors for a little each day. Today was overcast, but it still warm enough to almost be considered pleasant.

Ash's arm might have hindered him from some activities, but he could still talk to the horses well enough. He'd always had an affinity for animals, and seemed to understand them. When he ran away from the orphanage, he actually spent some time working as a hand for a traveling circus; that's where he learned respect for large animals. He'd learned even more when he'd quit and signed on to a cattle drive, as well as how to handle a rifle. By the time he was Nate's age, he was putting those skills to good use, thinning out the great buffalo herds in the Dakota Territory. He'd sell the meat to the Army and the hides to a European exporter. He made enough money to buy some land in the new Wyoming Territory and build a small house. He'd started tracking and catching the wild mustangs from the nearby valley, mainly as something to do to keep up his skill with animals. When he'd discovered his talent for it he gave up hunting buffalo altogether, and made a name for himself as a provider of fine horseflesh. The years passed, Nate arrived, and they'd built the ranch up together.

And now, watching the kid talk to the horses as he settled them back in their stalls, he knew that he'd taught him well. Nate was good with the animals too, and had a better business sense than Ash did. If Nate thought it made sense to breed the animals that they had, maybe Ash should listen to him. It was disconcerting to think that he was wrong and the scrawny kid he'd saved so many years ago was actually right. Ash wasn't quite ready to admit it, but it gave him plenty to think about. And Lord knew that he needed something to think about besides the delectable Molly Murray.

He wasn't going to last, stuck here on the ranch with her for the whole winter. Something was going to give; either one of them would have to leave, or he was going to give into his instincts and make love to her. Just thinking about how she'd reacted to his nearness this morning made the crotch of his jeans tighten. He wanted to kiss her more than any woman he'd ever met, and he wasn't going to deny himself too much longer.

Only problem was, Molly wasn't the type of woman you just kissed and moved on. She was the type you kissed, and then savored, and made sweet, sweet love to... and then did it again the next day.



She was a forever type of woman, and Ash was surprised to realize that he didn't mind. He was a year shy of thirty, and past the age when most men found a wife to care for them. He'd honestly never considered it, figuring that things were going fine the way they were with the two of them on the ranch, and assuming that no woman would want to be stuck way out here.

But Molly Murray was making him rethink his assumptions. She didn't seem to be pining for the city, and he was discovering that he'd like nothing more than to have her here with him. It'd be nice to have someone to grow old with, and Molly was just the kind of woman he'd never allowed himself to dream of.

Thinking about Nate moving on was uncomfortable, though. They had a good partnership, even though he was close to twice the kid's age. They understood each other perfectly, often able to communicate without talking. Ash really did think of him as a younger brother, and needed his help on the ranch. Sure, that'd been especially important since he'd busted his arm, but Nate had been his partner for years, building the ranch into the success it was. More than that, Ash needed him around, to come up with hair-brained ideas that might just work, or to argue about the soundest way to provide for the ranch's future, or to laugh with at the supper table.

But other than his obligation to Ash—which Ash considered long since paid—there wasn't really much keeping Nate here. Ash had made it clear at the beginning that the ranch was his, and that the kid could work for his keep. But pretty soon after he arrived, Nate stopped being a hired hand and became family. He treated the ranch and the horses like his own, even though Ash insisted that his say was final.

Hell, Nate had just as much right to this ranch as Ash himself did. He'd busted his rear for the last eight years to make it a success, and they wouldn't have near as much success as they did without his labor. But the land was all in Ash's name, and the money all in Ash's accounts. And that didn't seem right.

He was still thinking along those lines after they'd hitched up one of the older horses to the sleigh and headed for the distant patch of stub pines along the stream east of the house. He was thinking about Nate's contributions to the ranch, and how he could go about making sure his kid brother got what he deserved.

They hadn't said much to each other, each lost in their own thoughts. It didn't occur to Ash to wonder what Nate was thinking, until his brother asked him, first.

"What've you been so quiet about, all this time?"

"Just thinking about the ranch. And you." He took a deep breath. "I never told you this, but when I was a kid, in the orphanage, I... well," He shrugged one-sidedly, "I always wanted a brother." He

glanced sidelong at Nate. "I finally got one, and he doesn't know how much he means to me."

Nate was hunched over the reins, but when he heard that, he straightened slowly. A flush crept up the dark skin of his cheeks, and he very clearly did not look at Ash. The older man hadn't been raised with much affection, and then had been on his own for years. When Nate first came into his life, he'd been a burden, then a help, and then family. Ash couldn't imagine life without his kid brother around, but he'd never once said that to him.

From what Nate had told him of his life before his mother had died, the boy hadn't had much affection either. Life was hard out west, and harder still for those deemed inferior by their neighbors. Nate was a bastard of mixed blood, and despite the fact that he was a good kid, that's all anyone thought of him. Ash knew that the beating he'd saved Nate from hadn't been the first, and the seven-year-old boy showed up at his home knowing more about the seedier side of human nature than he should have.

And now they were each the other's only family, and Ash had never told him what that meant to him. He cleared his throat, trying to find a way to express what he felt, a new struggle for him. "Nate—"

His brother had turned his head away, and now he mumbled something that Ash didn't understand.

"What?"

Nate turned forward again, apparently intent on the horse's backside. He cleared his throat, and tried again. "Yeah. I love you too, big brother."

Ash nodded, satisfied that nothing more needed to be said on the subject. More miles passed beneath their runners, as he wrestled with the other concerns, though. Nate deserved to know what he meant to the ranch, too, not just to Ash. But how to show him?

They were turning into the gully that led down to the stream, when he cleared his throat again. "You know, I've been thinking about starting a breeding program next year, like you suggested. Maybe we can grab some two-year breeders in the spring, rather than just racers. What do you think?"

Nate turned incredulous eyes to the older man. "What do I think...?" And Ash felt shame that the kid was so surprised to be asked his opinion. *Have I really been that bossy?* But Nate cleared his throat and started again. "Yeah, you know I think it's a good idea. I think a few of the stallions we've got left are viable options for breeders, too, but before you do anything you'll have to build at least one more corral, and some stronger partitions, if not a new barn."

"We'll have to build a new corral in the spring, then. We can make plans this winter. And if it takes us an extra year, that's fine too.

I like the idea of working towards a goal, rather than just doing the same thing every year.”

The kid was still dazed when they reached the group of pines, and while Ash enjoyed his reaction, he wished he'd said something earlier to show Nate his value. They picked a tree for boughs at random and each worked one side of the handsaw. Then they debated on which tree to choose for Molly's Christmas tree. Ash honestly had no idea what made “the perfect tree”, as Nate said, but the kid had plenty of opinions. So Ash sighed, sat on the edge of the sleigh next to the first tree, and watched his brother pick his way among the snow drifts, looking at each tree from several angles.

“Here it is!” It was bigger than the rest, a good foot taller than even Ash, and nice and bushy. Ash supposed it was a good first Christmas tree for Nate.

He clamored down from the sleigh with the saw, and stomped to the base of the tree, where Nate was busy brushing the snow away, so that they could cut the trunk as close to the ground as possible. It was a little galling to Ash to know that he still needed his brother's help with something as simple as cutting down a tree, and he looked forward to next month, when Doc Sanderson would take the cast off his arm.

As with almost everything they did, the brothers worked well together, communicating without words, and the tree was soon cushioned on the snow beside the frozen stream. Leaving the saw to Nate, Ash lifted one end of the pine with a grunt, and lugged it towards the sleigh. “So, what had *you* so quiet on the trip here?”

Nate looked away and tried to shrug nonchalantly. “Just thinking.”

Lifting the tree into the sleigh didn't take much effort, but Ash was distracted. “About what?”

It wasn't until they'd turned the sleigh around and were heading back home that Ash realized the kid hadn't answered. “What were you thinking about?”

Nate sighed, and Ash could tell he wanted the older man to drop the subject. But then Nate surprised him by blurting “Molly.”

The flash of jealousy surprised Ash. “What about Molly?”

Nate shrugged again. “I like her. I like her cooking. It's nice to have someone else in the house.”

Ash felt his hackles lower, and reached up to scratch his beard to cover his momentary anger. “Yeah. I like her too.”

“Oh, really? I couldn't tell.” Ash heard the sarcasm, but was still surprised when Nate lowered his voice comically and grunted out “And if you fall in love, Molly? What then?” Turning slightly in his seat, Nate fluttered his lashes at his brother and pursed his lips like he

was waiting to be kissed. His falsetto was laughable when he squeaked out, “Oh, Mr. Barker! Oh, let me fetch you some more flapjacks! Oh, your shirt’s unbuttoned, I’ll finish dressing you, teehee!”

Ash was trying to look angry at the kid’s teasing, but couldn’t keep the smile from tugging at his lips over the ridiculous performance. Soon he was all-out guffawing, and Nate lapsed into chuckles too.

Wiping tears from his eyes, Ash settled back down, speculating on Nate’s impression. “Yeah, she is pretty nice to have around, huh?”

“I wish there was a way to keep her around past the spring. I’m pretty sure she likes us. Well, you at least.” Nate nudged him with his shoulder, which jarred his injury. The plaster-of-paris cast and the sling helped hold it immobile, and the constant ache was gone now. But Nate didn’t know that, and was immediately contrite. “Hell, I’m sorry! Is your arm okay?”

It reminded Ash of how helpful his brother had been, over the last month. He’d been the one to help him onto a horse—a tame one, not the mustang he’d been working with—and drag him into town to see the Doc. Nate had cooked and managed the horses, and been Ash’s spare hand, and done it with a gentleness the bigger man couldn’t have mimicked. He’d been lucky to have Nate around, and so he just sighed, not wanting to make the kid feel guilty.

“Nah, it’s feeling much better these days. But you’re right,” he quickly returned to the subject they’d been discussing, not wanting to lose the opportunity, “it *would* be nice if she’d stick around.”

“I do the books, though, Ash. I think you did a good thing by hiring her, and it helps that we don’t have to pay her much. But even then, we really can’t keep paying her past the thaw.”

“Yeah... uh, about that...” Ash took a deep breath. He’d been mulling this over in private for a day or two, but wanted to see what his brother—his partner—thought. “I was thinking about asking her to stay, only not really paying her, as such.”

Nate’s brows drew in, confused, so Ash hurried on. “You said yourself that she likes us, and yeah, I know she comes with two little sisters, but I figure we can manage fine. I mean, we may have to add on a room or something next year, but still...” Nate still hadn’t said anything, and Ash felt like a fool, blathering on like that. “Um...so? What do you think?”

The younger man was still confused, judging by the way he was hunched over the reins, and sending Ash baffled looks from beneath lowered brows. “What do I think about what? Keeping Molly?”

Ash took another deep breath, realizing he’d made a mess of the explanation. “I’m going to ask her to marry me.”

The younger man didn’t respond for a long time, and Ash wished

he could see more of his brother's expression. Finally, Nate nodded slowly. "I think that's a good idea. Her reputation's probably ruined by now, being stuck out here with us. Marrying her would fix that. And for you, it'd be good to have her around, to help with the ranch, even after that cast comes off. It'd mean she'd have to give up on opening a bakery, and you'd have to convince her she's not settling for you." Ash had seen the look in her eyes when he'd stood so close; Molly Murray was thinking about kissing him as much as he'd been thinking about it. He was pretty sure he could convince her to marry him.

Nate continued listing reasons it was a good plan, and ended with, "And of course she's a great cook. It's about time you settled down." His grin was a little shaky. "A man needs sons to take over his spread when he's old."

Slowly, Ash sat back, unsure what to say. Sons? He'd never considered that marrying Molly would lead to children—he damn well wasn't going to leave a woman as delicious as her untouched!—but now that he thought about it, the idea of a baby or two around was kind of nice, if Molly was the mother.

But suddenly Nate's hesitant response to the news made sense. If Ash married and had kids, what would happen to Nate? What would happen to the ranch? Nate had busted his rear right alongside Ash to make this place a success. Was he afraid the older man would kick him out if heirs came into the picture? Ash needed a way to tell Nate that he'd always have a home here, as long as he wanted. His kid brother needed to feel like he was wanted, too.

And just like that, Ash solved the problem that'd been bugging him.

He would deed half the ranch to Nate. He could do it; it was still all in his name, since he'd applied for the acreage and the increases. Half the land, and half the assets. That would make Nate feel secure enough, and show him that Ash had valued his contributions all these years. Babies or not, Nate would have a future on the ranch.

Satisfied, Ash cleared his throat. "Well, let's not get ahead of ourselves. I have to ask her still." Nate didn't respond. "We have to go back into town on the seventeenth, to pick up her sisters. I figured we could do it then, if she says yes." The younger man nodded. "But before I asked her, and changed the way things were working around here, I wanted to make sure you were okay with it."

Nate's dark brows lowered again, but he didn't look at Ash. "Why?"

The older brother half-shrugged. "Because we've been managing alright on our own, and if she says yes, things'll change a lot. I didn't ask you before I hired her, and that was a pretty major change, so I

should've. I'm sorry." Nate looked surprised at that admission, gratified too. "So I wanted to run this by you, first."

Another long moment passed, and Ash hoped he hadn't hurt Nate more than the kid was willing to admit. But then his younger brother half turned to him, his eyes bright with unshed tears and his smile gentle, and stuck out one gloved hand. Reaching across his body, Ash gripped it, feeling his brother's strength even through two layers of leather. He shook it, proud of the kid he'd raised into a young man.

"I hope you'll let me stand beside you when you marry her."

Ash had to clear his throat, and look away, not entirely surprised by the welling of emotion. His voice was still rough, however, when he said, "Nate, there's no one else in this whole world I'd be prouder to have next to me."

Neither said anything the rest of the ride back to the house. They didn't have to.

## Chapter 8

Molly had finished Annie's blue coat. It wasn't lined, but it would be serviceable enough to bring the girl home in. She'd made it larger than necessary, for her sister to grow into, and so that it could be worn over her current winter coat, for extra warmth. If she was able, in the next few days, she'd add pockets and a collar, and then later go back and line it. But for now, it'd keep Annie from freezing, and that was what mattered.

Her stew was bubbling perfectly, the dumplings having just been dropped in, and the pie ready to go into the oven, when she heard voices from outside. She breathed a little sigh of relief, thinking of the late hour, and hurried to tuck a few stray curls behind her ears. She smiled at her foolishness, but didn't stop herself from brushing the flour from her apron and making sure that her cheeks had some color. She was still smiling when she rushed to the front door and slipped out onto the front porch.

Ash's return smile seemed bigger, somehow, and she blushed when she noticed. *Ninny, stop trying to make more of things!* He was probably just happy to be home.

She hardly noticed the chill in the late afternoon air, watching Nate grab the other end of the tree Ash was trying to hoist over the railing by himself. She hurried to help stand it up and soon both trees were leaning against the logs of the house; she dutifully exclaimed over Nate's choice of Christmas tree, noting his pleased grin. She brushed as much snow off the branches as possible, intending to leave them out on the porch for the rest of the moisture to drip off, and hurried back to her dinner preparations.

When the men stomped into the house, she made sure that the stew was just coming off the stove, and ready to be ladled into heavy bowls she'd found in one cabinet. Both were very appreciative, and seemed in good spirits. Again, she praised their choice of trees, explaining that the larger, rounder one would be perfect along the back wall, and that she'd use the boughs from the scrawnier one to decorate the house.

After dinner, she cleaned up while they rested. She popped the pie in the oven, and then, shyly, brought out the bag of popping corn. When she offered to make some, Nate's eyes lit up.

"Can Ash make it? He makes the best popped corn!"

Molly smiled at his boy-like enthusiasm, but Ash was shaking his head. "Sorry, kid, I don't think I can handle it with only one arm." He shifted in his seat, and was suddenly piercing her with that gray gaze. "But I'm thinking Molly's probably a deft hand at it. Why don't we try her corn?"

Again, Molly blushed happily, and he met her smile with an answering one. She hurried through the process of popping corn, but with Nate standing over her shoulder, she made sure that it was perfect. She dumped the fluffy kernels into a bowl, and when she saw how many handfuls Nate ate between the stove and the table, she laughed and poured more into the pan.

She felt Ash's eyes on her as she tried to concentrate on the kernels. He was sitting at the table, long legs stretched in front of him, occasionally stealing a handful of popped corn from Nate's bowl. Whenever he caught her eye, he smiled, and it caused a funny fluttering sensation in her stomach. She didn't know why he was being more open than usual, but she found that she liked it.

They spent another hour at the table, enjoying the corn, and then the pie. Ash and Nate each exclaimed over the crisp apples and the delicate crust, and she relished the praise. Baking was her pride, after all. While they each had a third slice, she worked on stitching the popped corn kernels in a neat row. She soon had a long strand of the kernels, and Nate was eyeing them, unsure.

"Why'd you waste perfectly good corn that way?"

She had to chuckle, but he didn't seem to mind. "I'm going to use them for decorating, along with the cranberries. One time, when I was a little girl, we had a Christmas tree decorated entirely with edible things; cranberries, corn, gingerbread cookies, sweet little sugar angels. It didn't last long, but..." she sighed, "It smelled delicious!"

They had to both smile over that. Then Nate spoke up again. "We've never had a Christmas tree. I don't think I've ever had one, other than ones we've seen in the stores. You seem like you know an awful lot about them, though."

Molly smiled sadly, thinking of past years and a little boy who'd never experienced the joy of the season. "Christmas has always been the most wonderful time of the year. The time when it didn't matter if you didn't have enough during the rest of the year, or if you were feuding with your neighbor. You scrimped and saved and everyone got a little something in their stocking, and the food was delicious and plentiful, and you felt good about everyone, everywhere." She closed her eyes, picturing her family's house. "And best of all, there was always snow, to cover the buildings and the chimneys, and the terrible smoky factories. Snow seemed to make the season special, and pure." She glanced at Ash. "Does that make sense?"

And oddly, from his expression, she could see that it did. "So you like snow, huh? We get plenty of it, in these parts."

"I think it's beautiful here, but I've never felt anything this cold before!" Ash smiled, and the moment of shared appreciation passed.

Nate tried to steal some corn from her bowl, but she slapped his hand away, unthinkingly. She knew she should behave with more dignity and respect, since he was her employer's brother, but it was hard not to treat him like the scamp he was.

She cleared her throat. "Now that you're all fed and happy, I'm wondering if you wouldn't mind spending some time tomorrow decorating the tree? And maybe the house as well? I know that you've probably got plenty to do otherwise, but I can promise some delicious snacks, if you'll help." She looked hopefully from one to the other. Of course, she was perfectly capable of decorating herself, and they'd already done so much by taking time to fetch the tree, but it would be more meaningful if they helped. Besides, Nate had never had the experience of decorating, of preparing for the holiday, and that anticipation was important.

They glanced at each other, and almost in tandem, shrugged nonchalantly. Ash smiled again and turned to her. "Nothing too pressing waiting for us right now. We can give you some time tomorrow, if you'll follow through on those snacks. And if they're likely to be as delicious as this pie."

Her heart leaped, and she wasn't sure why decorating her



employer's house had suddenly come to mean so much. Her smile probably stretched from ear to ear. "They will be, I promise!"

She hummed her way through cleaning up, as they each busied themselves. Ash settled himself on one of the chairs in front of the fire she'd built up earlier, and invited her to join him. She did, picking up the long blue cape she was working on for Wendy. It was less involved than Annie's coat, which is why she'd chosen the design, but it would be just as warm.

Nate joined them at the hearth, and when she made a move to get up to give him the more comfortable seat, he waved her back, joking about "deferring to his elders". She had to laugh at that, and at the stories he entertained her with over the next hour. Ash was surprisingly involved, telling just as many stories about Nate as a child, which made the young man laugh harder.

Finally, Ash stood up, and Molly took that as her cue to start arranging her sewing. She glanced up to see Ash glaring at his brother. "Don't you need to go check on something in the barn?"

"Nah, everything was nice and—oh." Nate's brows rose comically. "Oh yeah, *the barn*. Yep, gotta go... do... something in the barn." He rolled his eyes, and smiled at her. "'Night, Molly!"

"Goodnight." She watched him grab his coat off the hook beside the door, and braced herself for the blast of cold air as he slipped outside. She wondered about the exchange, but only for as long as it took to turn back. Then she wasn't able to think at all.

She was alone with Ash. Alone in the house, and he was looking at her with that heated stare, and she was feeling quite warm. *Oh my*.

"Come here, Molly." Even his voice was warm, and low, and she felt it down in her belly. She didn't even think about ignoring the command, too enthralled to reason. Slowly, she crossed the braided rug to stand in front of him.

For a long moment he didn't do anything. Then, slowly, he raised his good hand to stroke the backs of his fingers down her cheek. She shivered, but couldn't step back, to put some proper distance between them. She was utterly captured by the intensity in those soft eyes. She felt like she was falling into them, and unconsciously leaned closer to him.

His smile was slight, and his gaze serious. "I like having you around, Molly." He was whispering, but they were standing close enough that she didn't have any trouble hearing.

Her response was instinctual. "I like being here, with you."

This time his smile reached his eyes. "You fit in here, Molly. Already your sewing has a place on the mantel," she didn't have to turn to know it was the truth. She'd been working there every free moment, to ready the girls' winter wear, "And you've reorganized the

kitchen to suit you.”

“I’m sorry.” Her whisper was slight, but she meant it. She hadn’t intended to take over their house; she was just the housekeeper.

“Don’t be.” He caught one loose curl and tucked it behind her ear, and then rested that hand on her neck. She fought to keep her cheek from pressing against his palm, and her heart steady. “It’s nice. I like that you’ve made this place your home.” He took a deep breath, and she couldn’t help but notice the way his chest strained against the fabric of his shirt. “I want you to think about making it your home longer, past the thaw.”

She didn’t understand, and it must have shown on her face. Using gentle pressure, he brought her face a little closer to his. “Stay here with us, Molly. With me.”

*What...?* And then she wasn’t thinking at all, because he’d lowered his lips gently to hers. The kiss was sweet and mild, and she held her breath to better appreciate it. Her first kiss—not counting that hotel guest’s harassment that had led to her dismissal from her job—and it was every bit as precious as she’d hoped and imagined in her childish fantasies. His lips were chapped, but that made them tender. She would have thought that the beard would itch, but it was surprisingly ticklish, and she couldn’t help but smile beneath his ministrations.

He was the one who pulled away, smiling back at her bemused expression. “Marry me, Molly Murray. Stay here and be my wife.”

Her lips formed a small ‘oh’ of surprise, and he groaned. With one swift yank, she was plastered against him, his good arm wrapped behind her, and her hands flattened against his strong chest. She remembered the feel of his chest hair against the backs of her fingers—had it been only that morning?—and then she wasn’t thinking at all.

If that last kiss had been soft and gentle, then this one was hard. He crushed his mouth to hers, and her heart leapt at the contact. This wasn’t the kiss of girlish fantasies, but the way a *man* would kiss a woman he wanted! His lips were demanding, his tongue probing and his breath hot... and she was captivated. She gave as good as she took, and learned more about men in those few busy moments than she could have imagined.

She came to her senses a short time later, sitting on his *lap*, of all places, on one of the chairs. His arm was still around her, but his forehead was pressed against her shoulder, and he was panting like he’d been running. Her fingers were gently stroking the muscles of his left arm, over the cast. He was so firm, so warm. He made her feel things she’d never felt in areas she hadn’t known could feel. There was a warmth between her legs that she couldn’t explain, but she squirmed a bit on his lap.

He barked out a hoarse laugh. “Molly, don’t do that. In fact, don’t

move at all.”

She stilled, and it was a long moment before he took another deep breath and lifted his head. He looked in pain, but then, she didn't feel top-notch either. She wanted to know why he'd stopped, but deep down she knew that if he hadn't, she'd be in his bed right now. She admired his honor and restraint, but a part of her bemoaned it, too.

Pressing his forehead to hers, he closed his eyes again, and whispered, “You don't have to say yes or no right now, Molly, but promise me you'll think about it. About marrying me. I don't want you to leave.”

It was no *I love you*, but it was the first, and only, marriage proposal Molly Murray had ever received. She was flattered. She opened her mouth to tell him so, but no sound emerged.

He straightened slowly, and sighed. He kissed her nose, and lifted her off of him, like she weighed nothing. “I think you should probably head upstairs, Molly. I'm not sure I can control myself around you, right now.”

That was enough to send her scurrying for the stairs, but she turned again before she closed the quilt that she used as a door. Ash was kneeling in front of the hearth, banking the fire. He half-turned, resting the poker on his knee, and found her in the darkness. “Goodnight, Miss Murray.”

She wasn't sure if he heard her whispered reply, but didn't think she could make herself say it louder, over the lump in her throat. “Goodnight, Mr. Barker.”

After that erotically disturbing encounter, she assumed she'd have trouble falling asleep, but she was wrong. She drifted off almost as soon as she lay down, and dreamed of giving up her goal of owning a bakery, of being stuck out on a lonely horse ranch in the middle of the Cheyenne wilderness. Of becoming Mrs. Ash Barker.

And in her dream, despite knowing that she'd settled for a man who didn't love her, who only wanted her because she made his life comfortable, she was genuinely happy. And that was what worried her.

## Chapter 9

Ash woke to the smell of bacon, and had to smile. Molly hadn't woken up early since that first morning, once Ash pointed out that she wasn't working the early shift at the hotel anymore. But he had to admit that on occasion, it was a nice surprise to wake up to. He made a mental note to try to get up early one morning and cook *her* breakfast, once his arm healed, and once she agreed to marry him.

He stacked his good arm behind his head and stared at the tall ceiling. He'd never before asked a woman to marry him, and couldn't help but think that he'd made a cock-up of the whole thing. But still, it just felt *right* to be kissing Miss Molly Murray beside the hearth. Holding her had felt so natural, it had been hard to stop. And kissing her? *Hooo-whee!* His smile grew. He didn't think he'd *ever* experienced a kiss quite that hot before.

Maybe it was because he knew she was a virgin. Maybe it was because he knew she'd make such a fine wife. Or maybe it was because she fit against him so perfectly, and had melted so completely into his kiss. When their lips first met, she'd stiffened, but quickly became so involved that he damn near almost lost control. He'd never kissed a woman who could meet him head-on like that; he didn't have to worry about hurting her, or getting a pain in his neck from bending. And he knew now that she'd be able to match his passions.

Yep, Molly Murray was the woman for him.

He stretched and scratched at his cheek under his beard. Maybe he'd shave it before she married him. A woman ought to see what she was getting, after all.

He pulled on his jeans and shirt, but didn't bother with the sling, or with buttoning it all the way up. As he eased open the door to the main room, and watched Molly bustling about the kitchen, a slow smile stretched across his face. God Almighty, a man could get used to such a sight. A beautiful woman making his house a comfortable place, doing all those little things women did to make a man feel good, like smiling and singing and leaving their scented soaps in the sink. Molly had made herself right at home—her sewing was on the mantel, her shawl hanging on the hook beside the door, and her spices carefully organized in one of the cabinets—and he didn't mind at all. He hoped it meant she was comfortable enough to stick around.

She finished flipping the bacon, and went back to stirring something in a big bowl. When he straightened, the floor creaked, and she let out a startled gasp and dropped the spoon. Her eyes flicked to his, and a blush crept up her neck. She grabbed the spoon, turned slightly away, and hunched over the bowl again, stirring frantically.

He was still smiling when he reached her, and hooking his good fingers under her chin, raised her lips to meet his. It was a sweet kiss, a soft one, over before she could draw a breath, but he still saw the confused daze in her eyes when he pulled away. "Good morning, Molly. Hope you slept okay?" His whisper was teasing, but she was too bewildered to appreciate it.

He enjoyed making her so flustered, but then she surprised him by putting down the spoon and reaching up to button up his shirt. Just when he thought he had her pegged as a virginal naïve miss, she went

and did something bold enough to make him think she'd been born and raised on a horse farm. Touching him in his current frame of mind was certainly bold, and he figured she'd do just fine out here in the Cheyenne wilderness.

That thought surprised a burst of laughter out of him, which drew her attention. A small smile curved those full lips, and he found himself wanting to kiss her again. So he did.

When they drew apart, she wasn't blushing, but watching him curiously.

"What?"

"You don't laugh very much. It's very nice. You should do it more often."

He chuckled and dropped a kiss to her forehead. He'd been thinking about that kiss, and had flattered himself to think she'd been thinking the same. The woman certainly kept him guessing. Life was going to be exciting with her around. "I guess I don't have much reason to laugh out here. I hope you'll change that."

Hinting at his proposal brought the blush back, but she didn't drop her eyes again, and his smile grew. "Maybe."

His heart leapt, and he was surprised at the happiness he felt, knowing that she was considering marrying him. When had he ever felt that way about another woman? When had a woman's feelings ever brought him joy? He wanted to shout, to twirl her around; but he appreciated her no-nonsense consideration. So instead, he just kissed her again.

A loud throat-clearing broke his concentration, and they drew apart to see Nate standing beside the kitchen table, his hands on his hips and his eyes glued to the ceiling with a long-suffering look. Molly practically jumped backwards, and hurried to pat her hair into order, although Ash didn't see anything wrong with it. She was obviously just flustered by the kid seeing them like that. She opened her mouth to say something—explain, probably—but then closed it and looked to him imploringly.

Ash didn't have to say anything, though, because Nate's quipped "I'm guessing she said yes, big brother?" proved that he'd been in on the proposal. Molly whirled back to the young man.

"I said 'maybe', and I'll thank you to not talk about me like I'm not here, it's just plain rude."

Nate's hands rose defensively, and he grinned charmingly. "Far be it from me to upset whoever's cooking that bacon. Smells great, by the way."

Her feathers less ruffled, Molly pointed to the table. "If you'll set out the dishes, I'll have breakfast out in a jiffy."

Ash leaned one hip against the counter, and watched her bustle

around the kitchen, putting the bacon on a platter with a heaping pile of spicy-smelling eggs and poking around in the oven. Her head was still inside when Nate asked, entirely too nonchalantly to be off-hand, "So why didn't you say yes, Molly?"

She backed out, most of her attention on the pan of sweet cinnamon rolls she held between two rags. Ash's mouth watered at the sight. He'd only had cinnamon rolls once before, when he'd been invited to dine with the commander at Fort Laramie, and he'd long remembered the succulent little bits of sweetness. Suddenly, he was just as interested in those rolls as her response.

She kicked the oven door closed behind her, and crossed to the table. Carefully arranging the pan on a towel, she distractedly answered Nate. "Because where I come from, there's a word for a housekeeper who dallies with her employer, and it's not a nice name."

The young man reached out and grabbed her hand. Surprised, she gave him her full attention. "They're probably saying those things already, and they'll stop saying them when you marry Ash."

She tried to pull away. "There's also a word for a servant who marries her employer."

"Yep." The kid grinned again. "'Wife'." She frowned at his teasing, and Ash watched his brother's eyes soften. "Ah, come on, Molly. We really like having you around, and hopefully you like us. Say yes to him, and stay here."

She finally succeeded in freeing her hand, and she tucked a curl behind her ear. "And what about my sisters? Do you think you'd like having them around?"

Nate shrugged. "Life's not easy out here, but it's easier with more people. Having you here has been helpful, since we're down to three hands otherwise." He winked at Ash, who managed to not groan at the stupid joke. "And having two more sets of hands would be great."

"Even if one set belongs to a little girl?"

"If she can learn to make soap or cure meat or tend a garden or any of the other things we don't have enough help—or talent—for now, that'll save Ash money in town. So yeah, it'll be good to have more people."

Ash noticed that Nate had mentioned "Ash's money", which reminded him that he needed to get working on that deed. The kid deserved to have some ownership of the ranch.

But he forgot all that when Molly turned to him, the question in her eyes. He could tell she wanted him to confirm what Nate said. So he nodded. "Right now we buy everything—including most of our food supplies—in town, which cuts into our profits. Yeah, having extra mouths to feed will cut into our profits too, but having extra hands that aren't worried about expanding the business, and just want

to help keep us alive... that'll be real useful." She didn't say anything, and he got to wondering about little Annie again. "You think your sisters could handle that?"

She raised her chin. "I know they can. We've been surviving on our own, and doing without store-bought goods since the Fire. The girls will pull their weight, and they can help with the ranch, too."

Seeing that Nate was finished setting the table, Ash held Molly's chair out for her. Surprise showing on her face, she sat down, and the others joined her. As he was scooping a helping of eggs, Ash continued. "Sounds like you're thinking about staying, Molly."

She sighed, not making a move towards the food. Nate noticed, but was busy shoveling eggs in his mouth. Through the food, he asked, "What's holding you back?"

She didn't answer. Ash put down his fork. "Molly." When she looked up at him, finally, he raised his brows. "What's wrong? What are you worried about?"

She sighed again, but didn't turn away. "It's just... since I was a little girl, helping my step-father in his shop, I knew that's what I wanted to do. And that's what I've been working towards, even after the Fire took away all our options."

Well, hell. He'd been hoping that she'd get over that goal, but didn't know how to convince her. "And is that still what you want? Your dream?"

"Yes!" Then she took a deep breath, holding it for a long moment, and released it in a great heaving sigh. "No. I don't know. I'm twenty-two! That's too old to be chasing rainbows across Creation. I guess I just want a place where we'll all be safe."

He nodded, and took a bite of the cinnamon roll he'd served himself... and completely lost track of the conversation for a moment. He closed his eyes in pleasure, allowing the moist sweetness to dissolve on his tongue. It was better than he'd remembered, and he sighed happily. "Molly, sweetheart, I promise that if you keep baking stuff half this good, Nate and I will appreciate the heck out of it. If you want to open up a bakery," He opened his eyes, determined to say something to make her happy. "We'll... I dunno... ride your cakes into town every day and sell them at Bullard's."

She laughed aloud at the ridiculous picture, and must have been feeling better, because she helped herself to a piece of bacon and a roll. "That's sweet, Mr. Barker, but you're too busy here to accommodate a silly dream."

He covered her hand in his, and when she looked up at him, he was captivated by those creamy eyes. "How about coming up with a new dream, Miss Murray? A home and maybe some kids?" She blushed, but didn't look away. "I promise I'll keep you and your sisters

safe.”

He couldn't be sure, but he thought he was wearing down her resistance, and that she'd say yes soon enough. He turned on what charm he could find for the rest of the day.

After that delicious breakfast—Nate and he practically had a fight over the last cinnamon roll—Molly cleaned up while they rushed through their morning chores. Then she set Nate to cutting boughs off of the scrawnier tree, since he had two good hands, while she helped Ash set up the nicer tree beside the hearth. It took a while before she was finally satisfied that it was up straight. She sent him out for snow to put in the bowl the trunk was sitting in, so the tree wouldn't dry out too quickly, and when he returned he helped Nate drag in the boughs.

She showed them how to drape the ribbons and garlands around the tree, and they laughed almost continuously at their efforts. Nate grasped the idea quickly, but Ash couldn't seem to do more than throw the stuff at the tree and hope it stuck; he wasn't certain if it was his having only one arm to work with, or if he just plain lacked any artistic ability. Either way, he sure enjoyed Molly's efforts to teach him. He made sure to kiss her as many times as he could get away with, and she didn't seem like she minded.

When they finally stepped back and surveyed their handiwork, Ash had to admit that they'd done a good job. The tree sure was pretty, with all the red and white bows and cranberry and popcorn garlands. Before she'd let them start weaving the boughs, together, though, she brought out the cookies she'd made that morning. She'd been stirring the batter when he first surprised her—although he'd had other things on his mind beside noticing—and had baked them while the men had been out doing chores. They had cinnamon in them, which made the whole house smell delicious, and chewy raisins that were a nice surprise. She blushed when he told her how good they tasted, especially when he joked how good *she* tasted.

He thought her special treats—the ones that she'd promised if they'd help her decorate—were over, but not quite. After she'd shown them how to weave the boughs of pine together and tie them to the steep bannister and hang them around the mantel, she left Nate to decorate them with the leftover red ribbon and cranberries, and beckoned Ash over to the kitchen area.

She'd popped a big bowl of corn while they'd been busy, and something sweet and sticky was boiling on the stove. It smelled almost like caramel, but it dried hard, and she showed him how to pour it slowly over the bowl, while she frantically stirred and tossed the corn beneath it. The result, once it'd dried, was sweet popped corn even crunchier than usual, and delicious with some salt. Ash had to laugh



at how Nate almost inhaled his first serving.

It started to snow sometime that afternoon, but they both were able to assure Molly that it was a dusting, and wouldn't affect the train schedule or getting into town in two days. But it sure was pretty, with the cozy fire and the drifting snow. They sat around the hearth, enjoying Molly's corn creation, and some sort of hot chocolate drink that was almost as good as coffee, and Ash made a mental note to work on some more comfortable chairs this winter. The two had always been enough for them, but with Molly, and soon her two sisters, the kitchen chairs wouldn't be enough.

Nate challenged her to a game of checkers, and soon she was teaching the kid the finer points of chess, with some made-up pieces. Then they both decided to teach her poker, wagering handfuls of popped corn, and they laughed all through the afternoon. Who would have thought that a few bits of Christmas frippery could make for such a relaxing day?

Ash felt... content. Between Nate and Molly, he felt like he was surrounded by family, and while he'd never guessed that's what he needed in his life, the thought pleased him inordinately. He felt loved. Nate was the only family he had, and he loved the kid. Molly... Molly would be his family, too, if he had his way. They hadn't talked about love, but he wondered if that's what this feeling of contentment when he looked at her really was.

Was he falling in love with the woman?

## Chapter 10

The next morning, Molly was up early. She'd hardly slept at all, thinking about Ash's offer of marriage and what it would mean. He was the first man she'd ever considered marrying. Yes, he was the first one to ask, but more importantly, he was the only man she'd ever met that made her feel so... so *content*. For years she'd had her dream of opening a little bakery, and supporting her sisters, but now she was wondering if that's really what she wanted.

Now, she was thinking that maybe, just maybe, running a household in the middle of the Cheyenne nothingness, with her sisters and a good man and his brother might be what she wanted. Maybe this was her new dream? She knew that when she thought about the future, picturing them all crammed in this cozy little house, Ash and she sharing his bedroom, made her feel warm and pleased and... *right*. And the thought of packing up the girls and heading to Salt Lake City and saying goodbye to Ash and Nate made her nauseated. So obviously, her subconscious wanted her to stay, and to make a life here.

But she'd always promised herself that she wouldn't settle. She wouldn't marry a man who didn't love her just because it was the "right" thing to do at her time of life. She couldn't imagine the pain it'd cause to know that her husband didn't love her back.

Because, Lord help her, she was falling in love with Mr. Ash Barker.

It was understandable. She'd been living with the man in close quarters for two weeks now. She'd seen firsthand how kind, and gentle, and strong and masculine he could be. She'd witnessed his caring when he was teaching his brother, and his easy strength around the ranch. She was falling in love with those firm muscles and soft gray eyes and quick smiles. She admired the way he'd worked hard to make his ranch a success, and hadn't let an injury stop him. She even liked his desire for solitude, and found the ranch's setting as lovely as he did.

She liked everything about him, even his occasional grumpiness and the rarity of his laughter.

And he liked her, she knew. He liked her cooking, and having her around to help in the house, and she suspected he even liked having another person to talk to, besides Nate. She knew Ash was forthright and honest, and wouldn't have asked her to marry him if he didn't think that they could be happy living together. But "liking her cooking" and "being happy living together" wasn't exactly "in love."

How could she marry him, knowing that she was falling in love with him, and he merely appreciated her presence around his house?

Around this point in the internal argument, Molly had thrown off the covers, turned up the lamp, and started to re-arrange the loft area for her sisters' arrival. She'd tried to be as quiet as possible, and eventually wore herself out enough to sleep, but she hadn't come to any decisions.

She must have looked exhausted when she finally came downstairs to start a batch of flapjacks, because Ash asked if she was okay as soon as he stepped out of his bedroom.

His jeans were slung low on his hips, and his flannel shirt was a green that highlighted his eyes. He hadn't buttoned it up again, and she started towards him to help. He intercepted her, though, and gave her another one of those gentle, spine-tingling kisses that affected her almost as much as passionate ones.

Dear Lord, how could she leave him? How could she go to Salt Lake, never knowing if his touch was as nice as his kisses? She'd never, ever be able to think about another man, knowing the way Ash made her feel. She sighed. She was beginning to suspect she was going to have to marry the man, just to assuage her curiosity.

His soft "Mary me, Molly" made her heart flip, and then melt, and

she closed her eyes on a groan. She was acting like some kind of love-sick puppy! She *was* love-sick!

She made it through breakfast, somehow, listening to their conversation with half an ear, and thinking about what it'd be like to spend every morning like this. Afterwards, Ash asked to borrow her scissors from her sewing kit, promising to return them cleaned and sharpened. When they left for the barn, she busied herself cleaning up the house and admiring their Christmas decorations. She'd see her sisters the day after tomorrow, and wanted their first real Christmas in years to be special.

But no matter how busy she tried to keep herself, she couldn't stop her mind from mulling over the possibilities ahead. Should she marry Ash and stay here as his wife? It would give her sisters a safe, happy home. Would it really matter if Ash didn't love her back? He was willing to give her everything she and the girls needed to be happy, and it would be nice to have a place to belong.

She took out her sewing, pleased that she'd cut out all of her major pieces two days ago. Knowing that the girls at least had outer wear to get them back to the ranch, she'd been working on putting together little Christmas presents for everyone. For both girls, she made thick mittens out of the soft gray fabric that reminded her so much of Ash's eyes, lined with the blue wool. They were simple little things, but she would embroider pretty blue flowers around the wrists—when had she last had time to practice embroidery?—so that they'd match Annie's coat and Wendy's shawl. For Ash and Nate, who had thick leather gloves for working with the horses, she was making scarves from the blue wool, with swirls and their names picked out in gray thread. Again, they weren't much, but it was nice to know that each of them would have something special for Christmas.

Holding one of the soft mittens between her fingers, hunched over the comfortable chair in front of the fire, Molly was struck by how similar the color seemed to Ash's eyes. He really did have the most remarkable eyes; soft and gentle. She remembered how big and scary he'd seemed to her when they first met—had it only been two weeks ago?—but how the kindness in his eyes had surprised her. She might have wondered if he only seemed gentle because he had limited use of an arm, but she knew, *knew* with a certainty that surprised her, that he would be just as mellow, just as slow to rile, when the doctor removed his cast.

He'd been nothing but kind to her, and would be kind to her sisters, she knew. He would treat them all well, and make sure they were happy and productive. She took a deep breath, blinking back tears.

She would marry him. It was best for her sisters.

It was best for her.

The decision lifted a load off of her shoulders, and she felt lighter, somehow. Smiling slightly, she tucked her feet up under her skirts, and tried to focus on her embroidery as she wondered what it'd be like to become Mrs. Ash Barker. She was still daydreaming when her lack of sleep the night before caught up to her, and she dropped off.

Molly was curled up on one of the chairs when Ash and Nate returned from their work. These days, the horses that were left required less effort, but they made sure to exercise each one individually. They spent a lot of time discussing plans for Nate's new breeding program, but not today. Using Molly's shears and a piece of an old mirror Nate held, Ash had trimmed his beard off close to the skin.

He shaved weekly during the summer, when anything longer than a few days' growth was hot and itchy, but let it grow into the bush it'd been during the winter, to keep his face warm. But his face would survive, and he was looking forward to Molly's reaction when she saw it. But he was a little nervous; would she think him handsome? Did it really matter if she found him attractive? He knew from the way she kissed him back that she was at least interested in him physically. But he wanted her to be pleased with him as a choice of a husband.

His big reveal would have to wait, though, because she looked so adorable when she was sleeping. He supposed she was making up her rest from the night before. He'd woken several times to hear her pacing or moving furniture up in the loft, although he could tell that she was trying to be quiet. He badly wanted to go to her, to take her in his arms and demand to help her with whatever was wrong. But he guessed it had to do with his proposal, and figured the best thing would be to just let her argue it out with herself, and hopefully come to the right decision.

He and Nate stomped around a bit, making sure the snow landed on the rug by the front door, and shaking off their coats and hats, but Molly still didn't wake up. His brother went to investigate the pantry cabinet for any of the leftover cookies—no surprise there—and Ash crossed to Molly.

Leaning over her, he decided to surprise her with a kiss. It worked. He felt her come awake under his lips, and slowly respond. But then her eyes flew open, as if she'd only just realized what she was doing, and she started frantically scooping up her sewing, something blue and gray, and shoving it back into her bag.

Then suddenly, she stopped, and slowly turned to look at him, registering the change. She stood up, and gently touched his cheek. He liked the way it felt—he liked the way *she* made him feel—but he was watching her face closely. She hadn't smiled, and those coffee-brown

eyes were curious.

He couldn't stand it any longer. "Do you like it?" He knew he looked different. Hell, for most of the winter, anyone who looked at him would only see his eyes between his thick beard and scraggly hair. But she was finally getting to see his face, and he wondered what she thought.

Her touch was light when it skimmed over his chin, stopping briefly on the deep cleft his beard had hidden. He was leaning towards her, so he had no trouble hearing the slight whisper. "You are even more handsome than I suspected."

He grinned, and captured her hand with his good one, bringing her fingers to his lips. He placed a small kiss on each fingertip, and loved the way she shuddered and closed her eyes.

"Yes." He didn't understand, until her eyes flew open again and she pierced him with a direct gaze. "My answer is yes. I'll marry you, Mr. Barker."

His smile was spontaneous, and huge, and didn't come nearly close enough to containing all the joy he felt at that moment. He dropped her hand and wrapped his arm around her, pulling her closer. He lowered his lips to hers, and she met him halfway, and he kissed her like he'd kissed her when he first proposed.

She was clinging to him unsteadily when he finally released her, and he realized that even he was having some trouble maintaining control. He heard chuckling, and was a little chagrined that he'd forgotten Nate's presence. Somehow, Molly made him forget things, and only think about wanting to kiss her. And now, after what *seemed* like forever, he had her agreement to marry him; he could spend the rest of his days thinking about kissing her.

No. He grinned again. He could spend the rest of his days *actually* kissing her.

They turned to Nate. The kid was sitting on the table, his legs swinging, munching on what—judging from the crumbs—was not his first cookie. He was grinning, and said around the food in his mouth, "Looks like you should have trimmed the beard earlier, big brother. Molly was obviously just afraid of that bush."

Ash just smiled. His beard was a constant butt of Nate's jokes, mainly because the kid couldn't grow one. He looked so much like his Indian grandmother that Ash suspected he probably never would, but he never mentioned that to the kid.

Molly actually blushed over Nate's teasing, but lifted her chin. "Actually, I'd decided before I fell asleep. Sorry about that, by the way." He kissed her forehead, just because he could, and to tell her he didn't mind. "I know that Ash will treat us well, and I want my sisters to have a good home."

"I'll make sure you've *all* got a good home, Molly. Although Nate's going to have to help me put on another room before we start having kids."

Her eyes grew wide, and he wondered if she'd honestly never thought about having babies. But then a small smile crept across her face, and he figured they'd work it out when the time came.

Nate was looking uncomfortable. He stared down at the half-eaten cookie in his hand. "What's up, brother?"

The kid didn't look up, but shrugged. "You could put a baby in my room. Or maybe the girls there and the baby in the loft."

"Oh, you want the addition for yourself?"

He shrugged again, and looked towards the window. In profile, Ash could see so much of the Indian blood that made the kid a second-class citizen. The sharp nose and the strong jaw that hardened with stubbornness, not to mention the hair that brushed against his shoulders.

Ash got a bad feeling. "Nate? What are you thinking?"

His brother licked his lips. "Well, now that you've got a wife, and maybe a family, I figure I might go see about hiring on with one of those big outfits east of the city. See if they needed another hand."

Ash's heart sunk. Leave it to the kid to get it all backwards. "You figure there's not a place for you here anymore?" Nate didn't say anything. "How about your breeding program?"

Nate shrugged. "It's your ranch, your horses."

Ash sighed, and dropping his arm from around Molly, ran his fingers through his hair in exasperation. "It won't be, after Christmas."

His younger brother's gaze swung to him in surprise. "You're selling the ranch?"

"No, kid. I'm giving half of it to you."

Nate's mouth fell open, and Ash almost smiled at the kid's look of surprise. The younger man blinked, blinked again, and slowly sat up straighter. Ash could tell he didn't know how to react; maybe he didn't realize Ash was telling the truth.

"I decided a while ago that it was stupid for you to bust your rear for this ranch, and it all to belong to me. So when we go into town tomorrow, I'm going to stop by the lawyer and deed half of it to you."

"But... *what?* I mean, this is your land. It was your land long before you saved my life! Why would you want to give half of it to some brat you've had to take care of all these years?"

There was a look of desperation in those green eyes, as if daring Ash to make the words true, but the older man shook his head. "You're my brother, Nate. You have been since that first summer, when you wormed your way into my life and refused to let me be. You've taken care of me as much as I have you." Nate looked down

again, but Ash pushed through the awkward explanation. “I figured we could keep building this place together, and maybe, if you wanted, we could build you another house someday, for your family...”

His kid brother looked up, and Ash pretended he didn’t see the tears in those hazel eyes. “I... I don’t know what to say.”

Molly’s voice was no-nonsense, and so unexpected that both brothers jumped slightly. “Say ‘thank you’ and then tell him that you love him.”

Nate flushed. “Yeah, of course, thank you. I mean, that’s incredible, I never considered that you would—”

“Now stop stammering, get off my table, and come give me a hug to welcome me to the family.”

Ash had to grin when he turned to his wife-to-be. “Your table? You’re getting bossy already, huh?”

Her chin went up, despite the blush, and reminded him of how much he appreciated her candor and practicality. “You’re the one who asked me, Ash Barker. If I’m to be your wife, then I’ll have claim to at least half this house,” she nodded towards Nate, “More if Nate will admit that he likes my cooking enough to let me stay.” She pretended to glare at the boy, who quickly slid off the table and popped the rest of the cookie in his mouth, a grin—more strained than normal—spreading across his face.

“You’ll do, Molly. You’ll do.”

She beckoned to him, and he slowly crossed the room towards them, his hands in his pockets, looking unsure. When he reached them, Molly looked significantly at Ash, and he burst into laughter at the thought of this woman already trying to boss him around. Life was sure going to be enjoyable with her as his wife.

Still laughing, he enveloped his brother in a hug, and relished the feeling of Molly’s arms around both of them.

He had given his brother a place in the world, and Molly had said she’d marry him. Saying that he was happy didn’t begin to cover it.

## **Chapter 11**

She couldn’t believe it was actually happening. She was on her way to Cheyenne, to pick up her sisters, so they could all start their new life together. And while there, she would marry Ash, and become a wife. She was terrified and excited and a little sick to her stomach about the whole thing. She knew he expected her to share his bed, and she was surprised to find that she was eager to experience that. She’d been a good girl for years, even in a time and place when many working-class women had ‘experimented’ before marriage... not because she was saving herself for any particular reason, but because

she hadn't had the time or the inclination. No man had ever, *ever* aroused even half the interest Ash did in her. No man had ever aroused her at all, truthfully. But now that she'd experienced his kisses, he could make her weak-kneed and giddy just with a heated look. And soon she'd share his marriage bed.

She sighed happily and snuggled down a little deeper in the buffalo-skin robe. It was late in the afternoon, and the air was already getting colder. Ash and Nate had put in many hours already that day, ensuring that the horses and other animals would survive for a day without their owners. Ash had told her that they rarely both left the ranch at the same time—not counting the last time, when he'd had to chase Nate into Cheyenne—but he wanted his brother beside him when they got married.

So it was well after noon when they ate the big meal Molly had prepared, and bundled all of the bags and blankets on to the sleigh—Molly wanted to make sure that the girls would be warm enough on their way to their new home—and they got on their way.

This trip was different from the one she'd taken *from* Cheyenne; Nate was just as talkative, and Ash was just as reticent, but this time, he kept his arm around her. His left arm had healed enough that he could hold the reins, as long as he didn't need to pull too hard, so he made sure she sat up against his right side. She was deliciously warm and cozy, snuggled under the same buffalo hide as him, her cheek pillowed against him.

She spent the hours watching what scenery there was. Whenever they had to cross a streambed—covered in snow, of course—there were scrub bushes or trees, some of which she even recognized. The mountains were behind them, and the land was as flat as her favorite iron pan. It seemed like the snow stretched out in every direction, but Ash seemed confident in the route they were taking.

She asked him why he'd chosen to settle someplace so desolate.

"You think it's desolate? Really?"

She reconsidered. "No, not really, I guess. It's actually quite lovely, in a lonely sort of way. There's beauty in it."

He nodded, and turned back to the horse's rump. "I'm glad you can see it. I chose it because it *was* lonely. It suited me."

"Why?"

He was quiet for a time, but she could see that he was thinking. "From my porch, I can see for miles, and it's all mine. No one to tell me what I can or can't do. It's lonely, but it's free, and I like that. Freedom is important to a man."

"I guess I can see that. I've lived in a city my whole life, but I can see the attraction to living someplace where the only demands made of you are for your own survival. No one else's."



“Exactly.” He squeezed her a little tighter. “I grew up in an orphanage where I couldn’t even go outside without someone’s permission. Usually it was only for an hour or two a day. I loved the sun and the heat and the cold and the rain. So when I eventually found work on the range, I enjoyed the weather and the freedom I didn’t have as a kid. That’s what Cheyenne, and the ranch mean to me. Freedom.”

Molly smiled, appreciating the passion and sincerity in his voice. “I like the sound of that.”

He turned slightly and kissed her forehead. “I’m glad, because I’m looking forward to having you out here with me. I know it’s hard work, and there’s a whole lot of nothin’ to see, but I think it’s pretty special.” She lifted her lips to his, and just before they met, he whispered, “I think you’re pretty special too.”

It was stupidly romantic, and made Molly’s heart melt. Then his kiss made her insides melt, and she was just a puddle of goo when he pulled her back up against his side for the rest of the cold ride into town.

They got two rooms for the night in that same hotel where she’d stayed before. It turned out that it was their preferred place to eat while in town, but they usually bedded down someplace cheaper, like the livery with their horses. Today was a special occasion, though, and so they’d splurged on actual rooms.

There was just enough time to visit Bullard’s store before closing, and the three of them picked out some supplies and personal tidbits. Knowing that they would soon be a family, Molly took special care in choosing small things to give as gifts on Christmas morning. She was standing beside a display of dolls, admiring one frivolously beautiful concoction in pink silk and wishing she had the money to waste on it for Annie, when Ash reached over her shoulder and picked it up.

“You going to start playing with dolls?”

She smiled. “No, but I did have quite the collection as a girl. I was just wondering if Annie ever had anything that beautiful.”

His eyes softened, but he smiled. “Well, she will this year.” He added the beautiful blonde-haired doll to his pile of items. It was sweet and generous, and Molly realized right then and there that she was head-over-heels in love with this man.

And if he was willing to do something as impractical as wasting money on a beautiful doll, just because a girl he’d never met would enjoy it, then it didn’t matter if he never loved her back. He would treat her well, and she wouldn’t regret marrying him.

So her smile was bright and sincere when they went to pay for their purchases, and he introduced her as his bride-to-be. It was the same sour-faced young lady behind the counter as last time, and Molly

took a little pleasure in watching her eyes widen in surprise. *That's right; he's making an honest woman out of me!* She managed not to giggle at the thought.

They enjoyed a late dinner together, just the two of them. Nate had made himself scarce, probably at his brother's urging, and Molly was pleased to have some time alone with the man she'd soon marry. They laughed and chatted and exchanged stories until well after bedtime. Molly was floating on air when he escorted her to her room. He kissed her goodnight at the door, and she was tempted to invite him in. But he pulled away first, and there was a twinkle in his eyes when he told her to sleep well. She fell into bed with a sigh, and even though she was worried she'd be up all night fretting about her sisters and the wedding and a million other things, she fell right asleep.

Ash was almost tempted to skip his errands to have breakfast with Molly the next day. After all, it was their wedding day. But he rarely came to town, and these were important. He'd see her in two hours at the train station.

His first stop was the church, because he knew that Reverend McCullough would be there early. Sure enough, he was sweeping between the pews when Ash doffed his hat and slipped through the doors. The two men met in the aisle, the little preacher positively vibrating with determination.

"Ash Barker, what's this I hear about you living in sin?"

The little man's anger was so clear, and so comical, that Ash stopped in his tracks. He half expected the preacher to start shaking a finger under his nose, like he was a tardy schoolboy. And when that very thing happened, Ash burst into laughter.

Reverend McCullough had never heard him laugh, based on his surprised reaction. "You think it's funny? Corrupting your servant?"

"Sorry, Reverend." His grin was unrepentant. "But there's been no sin, yet." The man of God relaxed slightly, but the determined look in his eyes didn't let up. "That's why I'm here, though. Molly and I want to be married today, before we head home."

The smaller man's brows eased, and a smile spread across his face. "Well, alright then. You should have said that in the first place. I'd be happy to marry you two."

They talked specifics for a few more minutes, and Ash was grateful the preacher didn't push him for details about his relationship with Molly. The fact that he was willing to marry them so quickly, before he'd even met Molly, was just how things were done out West. If a man found a woman he was willing to spend forever with, he had to snatch her up before someone else did. And Molly was well worth marrying.

After saying goodbye to Reverend McCullough, Ash stopped in to

see Doc Sanderson. The elderly man assured Ash that his arm was healing well, and that the cast would be ready to be cut off sometime after the new year. It was good news, and Ash was glad to know that he'd be able to use the arm more in the next few weeks.

He then made his way to the legal offices of Packers & Brown, two stuffy-shirted easterners he'd worked with before. Neither of them had ever ridden a horse, or even broken a sweat, but he knew they were honest, and that counted for a lot out here.

Even without an appointment, he sat down with Clayton Brown, and explained what he wanted to do. Within an hour he'd changed his will, naming his wife as his co-heir with Nate, and he'd deeded half the ranch to his brother. It was mainly in name only, meaning he'd deeded half the ownership to Nate; but he also named some prime land in the legal document, so Nate would have several hundred acres of good growing land, if he ever wanted to branch out from ranching. The lawyer never once asked why he was doing it, or commented on the fact that he and Nate weren't actually related, and Ash was grateful that he didn't have to explain. Brown did congratulate him on his upcoming wedding, though, and both men smiled when they shook hands.

Then Ash made his way to the train depot, sure that his little brother had escorted Molly there safely. He hoped the girls' train—he was going to have to start calling them by their names, since they'd be part of his family now—would be on time, and that they were actually on it. Truthfully, any number of reasons could have interfered with their travel, but when he'd arrived in town yesterday evening, he'd checked the telegraph station, and there wasn't any messages waiting for them. So he had to assume that Molly's sisters would be on the morning train.

He was striding down the street, enjoying the rare sunshine and the knowledge that soon he'd be able to swing his arm freely again, when he heard the train whistle. He smiled to think that Molly'd be seeing her sisters again soon, and started towards the station at a jog.

His kid brother was standing just inside the door, his hands shoved deep in his pockets, his dark hair tucked behind his ears, trying to dig his shoulders into the wall. Nate had always known prejudice and distrustful looks when he went out in public, so places like the train station often made him uncomfortable.

The young man was trying not to stare at the reunion going on across the station, by the big doors that led to the platform. Molly was alternately laughing and hugging two girls who stood beside a pile of trunks and bags. The older one was a year or two younger than Nate, with Molly's curly brown hair and sturdy build. She had spectacles perched on the end of her round nose, and was clutching a book

absently while she peered around interestedly.

When Molly sank to her knees to embrace the youngest girl, Ash saw her clearly for the first time. Molly had said that Annie was seven, but the little slip of a girl looked younger. She was frail, and had skin so pale it was almost translucent. He was suddenly concerned about the advisability of dragging such a sickly looking little thing to the ranch in the middle of winter. Molly was speaking slowly to Annie, and occasionally making funny-looking gestures. He was going to have to talk to her about her sister's health, and if she'd be alright in the middle of the Cheyenne nothingness.

Ash was looking forward to meeting the girls who'd soon be his family, but for now, he was content to rest his good arm across his cast, lean his hips against the wall beside Nate, and watch the three of them.

"...and the porter was *so rude* to us, but he did help us off the train, and I made sure we got all of our trunks, and they're still locked, see? Some of them we haven't opened since you helped us pack them, really. Except my books, of course, but I kept some of those with us. Annie has been reading a few, which is remarkably advanced, don't you think?"

Molly smiled and nodded when Wendy paused for a breath, and then a burst of laughter slipped out. She couldn't help it; she was just so happy to see them both. Wendy was so patient and kind to their youngest sister, but she did love to talk, and Annie couldn't appreciate it. So Wendy tended to chatter when she was around Molly, and her older sister couldn't fault her one bit. She smiled wider and hugged them both again, just because she could.

"You did a wonderful job of arranging everything, and getting all of our things here. I'm so proud of you, and can't wait to hear all about your trip." Out of habit, Molly made sure that she spoke distinctly, with her face turned slightly towards Annie. Since the younger girl lost her hearing after she'd learned to speak, she could understand a lot from watching lips. But they'd developed a type of language with their hands, and Molly occasionally made signs to emphasize the words she spoke. "But for now, I want you to meet the man who hired me."

She turned to the two men standing against the wall, and heard Wendy inhale sharply. "Oh, he's handsome, Molly. Who is that beside him, another servant? He looks like an Indian! Is he an Indian?"

Molly was only half-listening to her sister's chatter when she beckoned Ash, and couldn't help but take a moment to admire the way his jeans clung to his hips as he sauntered over to them. Blushing slightly, she took a deep breath and turned to her sisters. Wendy was staring up at Ash, shock and a bit of admiration in her eyes. Molly

wasn't surprised; Ash towered over both girls, and was incredibly handsome. Lord knew what Wendy was thinking, but if they'd been alone, Molly would certainly have heard about it.

"Girls, this is Mr. Ash Barker." Annie was wearing the frustrated look that meant she knew she was supposed to understand, but couldn't. Molly thought quickly, and made Annie's sign for 'fire'—wiggling the fingers of both hands upwards, like flames—and then lifted it towards her head, in a sort of opposite of 'rain'. Then she spelled 'ash' with her fingers, and Annie smiled. They often had to make up new signs, and Molly was glad they could, because Ash was going to become part of their family, and would need a name-sign.

She turned to Ash, and caught him looking thoughtfully at Annie. "Ash, these are my sisters, Wendy and Annie Murray."

He smiled easily, and nodded politely. Wendy had overcome her awe, and bobbed a curtsy. She nudged Annie, who followed suit. "It's very nice to meet you, Mr. Barker. Molly's telegraph said we'd be staying with you; Annie and I look forward to seeing your home."

"It'll be a little cramped, I think, but we'll fit. You'll see it tonight; it's a few hours outside of town."

"Oh." If the idea of being out on the range bothered her, Wendy brushed it off. Molly had always admired how flexible the younger girl could be. "Well then, if it's cramped, we have all the more reason to appreciate you and your wife and family allowing us to stay with you."

Ash's grin was more wry this time, and he flicked his eyes to Molly, as if wondering why she had introduced him as her employer. She flushed slightly in embarrassment. "Actually, I'm not married yet."

As his words registered, Wendy's eyes widened, and she turned to her older sister for confirmation. When Molly looked away, sure she knew what her sister was thinking, Wendy gasped. "Margaret Murray! You mean to say that you've been living in the middle of nowhere with an *unmarried man*?" She'd used Papa's scolding tone of voice, and Molly flushed further at the thought of her much younger sister chastising her in public.

Ash came to their mutual rescue, though, preventing both sisters further embarrassment. In one easy movement, he looped an arm around Molly's waist, and pulled her close to his side. "Sorry for the confusion, girls, but your sister left out something important." He leaned down just slightly to kiss her on her temple, and she couldn't help the sigh that escaped her lips. "After we load your luggage onto the sleigh outside, we're heading to the church, where Reverend McCullough is going to marry us."

Wendy's mouth made a small "oh" of surprise, and for once, she

didn't have anything to say. Molly was momentarily pleased at the way her sister had been shocked, until she heard Annie's little grunt of frustration. The little girl was peering up at the two of them towering above her, and knew something important was going on, but couldn't understand.

Molly stepped aside enough to put a little distance between her and Ash, and then caught Annie's eye. She pointed to Ash, and then herself, and then to her left ring finger. "Ash and I are going to be married."

The little girl's confusion turned to excited delight; she squealed and threw her arms around her oldest sister, and then Ash. Molly could tell that he was momentarily stunned by Annie's enthusiasm, but with her clinging to his legs, there was little he could do besides pat her head affectionately.

Wendy had overcome her surprise, and her smile was broad. "Well, then, that's lovely." Molly just managed not to roll her eyes at how grown-up her sister was trying to sound. She figured that after getting little Annie and all of their trunks across country, the girl was allowed to pretend to be a little more grown up than she really was. Molly promised herself that once they were all settled, Wendy would have a chance to go back to being a girl for as long as she wanted. "The baby and I would be delighted to go to the church with—"

"Naaah!" Annie's wailed 'no' interrupted Wendy, and all of them turned to the little girl. Molly understood her youngest sister's distress, though, and her voice was gentle when she corrected Wendy's use of the old nickname. "Annie is not a baby." She'd unconsciously made the signs for 'Annie', 'no' and 'baby', and the little girl nodded emphatically.

Suddenly, Ash inhaled sharply, and Molly saw a look of comprehension, and pity, flash through his gray eyes. It was gone immediately, though, replaced by a softness she couldn't quite identify. He pointed to Annie, and made the sign for 'no'—how had he understood that?—and then pointed to his ear. "Annie can't hear, can she?"

Molly felt her throat thicken, and had to look away, for fear that Ash would see the love brimming uncontrollably in her eyes. How could a man so large, so masculine, be so gentle and understanding? He'd seen and understood Annie's difficulties, and had even thought to include her in the realization, by using signs the little girl could understand.

He must have misinterpreted her reaction, though. "Did I say something wrong?"

Oh God, how she loved him at that moment. "No." She cleared her throat with difficulty, but still didn't look at him when she shook

her head. "You said something perfectly right, thank you. Annie can't hear." She finally glanced up at him, to see the worry lines across his forehead fading. "She lost most of her hearing when she was young, but she can often understand us by watching our lips. And she uses signs, and can write quite well."

Ash nodded and smiled at Annie, who was beaming back. "You said she 'wasn't well', but I'm glad she's not sick. Just tiny. As long as we keep her bundled up, she should be fine." Thinking of the serviceable coat she'd made the little girl, Molly only nodded.

Wendy dismissed the interruption of Annie's sign 'language'. "Well, we'd be pleased to join you at the church. I thought Molly would *never* get around to marrying, and it's nice to know that we'll have a place of our own here in Cheyenne, among family." She suddenly looked shy, more like a thirteen-year-old than a moment before. "I've always wanted a brother."

Ash smiled, and turned slightly to beckon Nate over. "Well, let me introduce you to the rest of the family." The young man straightened up hesitantly, and as he crossed to them, he kept his gaze on the floor and his hands shoved deeply into his pockets. Molly wondered at his reaction to her family, and at the look of frank appraisal in Wendy's eyes.

"Wendy, Annie, this is my brother, Nate Barker."

"Brother? But—"

Molly firmly interrupted Wendy before she could further embarrass Nate. She remembered how the girl had thought the young man was a servant. "Nate is Ash's brother, Wendy." She spelled out Nate's name for Annie, along with the sign for 'brother'.

Ash continued the introduction. "Nate, this little imp is Annie Murray, and her lovely older sister is Wendy Murray." Wendy blushed slightly at the compliment, and couldn't meet Nate's eyes. Molly wondered what she'd been thinking about the young man, to cause her such embarrassment.

For his part, Nate just nodded curtly to both girls. Annie smiled brightly up at him, and waved to say 'hello'. The little girl's sweet welcome drew a small smile from Nate, and Molly breathed a little easier, hopeful that her sisters and Ash's brother would be able to get along.

Ash himself broke up their meeting. "I know you girls must be tired, but we've got to get back to the ranch by this evening. How about Nate and I load up these trunks and bags, while you refresh yourselves? Then we'll head over to the church."

And suddenly, Molly couldn't think of anything else. She was going to be *married*. Today. To Ash. Her heart sped up, and her stomach tied itself in knots, and it wasn't entirely due to the lingering

kiss Ash left on her lips.

In a few minutes, she'd be *married* to him.

## Chapter 12

Ash kept his arm tightly around his new wife for the entire ride home. He couldn't believe how *complete* she made him feel, snuggled up beside him. And she was his, all his. He wanted to grin, but the wind had turned, and his face was cold enough without opening his mouth. Still, he couldn't help pressing the occasional kiss to Molly's hair, breathing in her delicious scent—she managed to smell like cinnamon even now—and thinking about their wedding night. He felt like a kid again, nervous and excited to be with his first woman. But Molly wasn't any woman, she was his *wife*.

The ceremony had been short and to-the-point; he'd known he could count on Reverend McCullough to marry them without a lot of fuss. Molly's sisters had stood beside her—Annie beaming and Wendy looking a little worried—and Nate stood next to him, looking uncharacteristically somber. The Reverend didn't go into any long homilies, but just had them repeat their vows. Molly stumbled a bit over the "as long as we both shall live" part, but Ash had only grinned slightly. She had the right to hesitate, the whole marriage was hasty. But he had every intention of spending a lifetime making her realize it was a smart decision.

The only surprise during the wedding ceremony had been on Molly's part, when Nate handed Ash the ring the older man had bought at Bullard's the day before. It was just a thin golden band, and the look of awe on Molly's face when he'd slipped it on her finger had made the price worthwhile. She lifted her hand to peer at it, and when she'd turned to him, she had tears in her eyes. He knew she hadn't expected a ring, and her surprise made him smile. What *was* it about the woman that made him feel like smiling so much?

He supposed that he was a man in love with his wife.

After the ceremony, they went over to one of the small restaurants in Cheyenne for a wedding dinner. He'd met the owners once or twice, but was surprised at the amount of effort they'd put into the meal, all for the newlywed's sake. The wife clucked over Molly, and admired her ring, and gushed over how much easier their lives would be now that they'd found each other. Molly, for her part, declared that the slices of cake the woman brought them after their meal of turkey and dressing to be some of the best she'd ever had. Ash figured that was pretty high praise.

And then, legally husband and wife, they'd climbed into the sleigh, Ash slapped the reins against the patiently waiting draft horse,



and they headed home.

At first, Wendy had chatted amiably about Cheyenne sinking behind them, and the stark whiteness of the surroundings, but soon she settled into silence, broken by the occasional question. The girls were snuggled between trunks on the back of the sleigh; Molly had made a cozy little nest out of blankets, and both were wearing their fine blue wool coat and cloak that she'd made them. Nate was riding beside them, as always. Ash would rather be riding too, but he hadn't been able to ride as much as he'd like since he busted his arm. Besides, if he were riding, it'd be harder to hold Molly.

She took his hand in both of hers, nestled against her legs under the blanket, and he traced the calluses on her palms. He liked that she wasn't afraid of hard work, and was looking forward to expanding their home with her. With one rough fingertip, he circled the simple gold band around her ring finger, and felt her shiver. He hoped it was from desire, not cold, but he freed his hand to wrap his arm around her again. She sighed, and pressed her cheek to his shoulder. She'd said little since they'd picked up her sisters, but as the normally taciturn one, he didn't mind her silence.

Her sisters were a surprise. Annie was... well, Ash couldn't think of any other word than 'adorable' to describe his youngest sister-in-law. He'd never had much use for the weak and useless of this world, which was why he admired Molly so much. Even when Nate had shown up all those years ago, starving and bedraggled, the kid had seen that he'd need to impress Ash if he wanted to stick around. But there was something about Annie, something precious and shining, which made Ash want to protect her. He'd been expecting a sickly little thing, and yeah, Annie was frail. But she was sweet and trusting, and Ash had taken one look into her bright eyes, and knew that she'd become part of his family.

Hell, being married was changing him already.

Wendy reminded him of her older sister, but she seemed more flighty. He'd turned around once or twice to see her nose buried in some book, and remembered that Molly told him the girl loved to read. Wendy was the one who'd come up with most of the language of signs that Annie used, and she was the one who'd taught the youngest sister to read and write, even without being able to speak. Ash wasn't so sure he liked Wendy's talkative nature, but as long as she was willing to work, he figured he'd put up with it.

He wasn't so sure about Nate, though. It seemed like his brother had taken one look at the girl, and raised his hackles. And she'd been ignoring him since they'd been introduced, but Ash caught her staring at his brother once or twice, looking curious.

He'd pulled Nate aside after the wedding, on the way to the

restaurant. "She say something to you, kid, that got you riled?"

His brother had shaken his head, but Ash didn't let up. If there was tension between the two of them, it wouldn't be pleasant to be snowed in all winter in the same house. "Then what's got you so quiet? Is it because she didn't believe you're my brother?" He winced. "Is it the Indian thing?"

Nate's chuckle was forced, harsh. "When isn't it 'the Indian thing'?" He sighed, and shoved his hands deeper into his pockets. "She's the prettiest girl I've ever seen, Ash, and she *knows* I'm not your brother—"

Ash's voice was as firm as his hold on the kid's shoulders when he said "You *are* my brother, Nate."

The younger man sighed again and nodded. "You know what I mean. She can tell I've got Indian blood, and there's no chance somebody as smart and pretty as her would notice someone like me."

Ash hadn't known what to say to that. His kid brother was probably right, as much as it pained him to admit it. Wendy might not be as prejudiced as the rest of the world, but not many respectable women would give Nate a second glance. He sighed too. It would probably be better if Wendy wasn't interested in his brother; they were practically family now.

There wasn't anything he could say to make Nate feel better. Instead he pulled his brother into a hug, and after a moment, felt the kid hug him back. As if Nate knew and understood Ash's loss of words, the younger man just mumbled "Congratulations on marrying Molly."

And now, the kid was much quieter than usual. Luckily, he had the long ride back to the ranch to think things over, and Ash was pleased to see that by the time they got home, his younger brother seemed to be more like to his usual self.

Wedding night or not, the two of them had to spend some time in the barn, with the animals. Nothing major had happened, but most of the horses were anxious for some exercise. Ash always felt badly when he left them like that, but with only the two of them on hand, it often couldn't be helped. He and Nate spent the rest of the afternoon calming the animals, and making sure they were forgiven for leaving them alone for so long.

Molly spent the time showing the girls around the house, although he supposed that didn't take long. The restaurant owner had sent them a bundle of leftovers, complete with extra cake, and by the time they came back from the barn, the womenfolk had laid it all out on the table.

Nate's smiles were back, although a little strained whenever he noticed Wendy looking at him. He teased Molly and Ash about their marriage throughout the meal, and made them all chuckle, even

Annie, when she understood the jokes. Ash figured she was probably giggling at Molly's blushes, more than anything, and even *he* couldn't remain 'sour-faced'—as Nate said—through it all.

But more than the teasing, Ash's mind was on the upcoming wedding night. He and Nate had helped Molly prepare for her sisters the day before, so he knew that *she* knew she'd be sleeping in his room tonight. The thought aroused him more than he'd guessed possible. Why, it was becoming downright uncomfortable to sit here and exchange heated glances with the woman. With *his wife*. If he didn't get her into that room and her clothes off soon, the heat between them might just ignite the pine plank table.

Apparently he hadn't been as subtle about it as he'd thought. Wendy must have seen the looks he'd been giving her sister, because she offered to clear the table, with a teasing glance at Ash. Annie jumped up to help her sisters, and Ash was just thankful to have a few minutes to stay seated.

It was later than he'd realized when the kitchen was cleaned up from supper, and both girls were yawning. Nate started yawning too, entirely unconvincingly to Ash's eye, and bid them all goodnight. Molly shooed her sisters up the stairs to the loft, but Annie broke away at the last minute. She ran across the room and threw her arms around Ash's neck, and he was surprised enough that he couldn't do anything but hug her back. She placed a kiss on his cheek, and made a sign that Molly had shown them all meant "good night", and then with a little blush, ran back towards the loft.

Ash watched her climb the stairs bemusedly. He could probably crush her with only one hand, she was so tiny. And without hearing, and little speech, it would be easy to dismiss her as useless. But she made him feel protective, and he liked the way she had opened her heart to him already.

He listened to the quiet murmur of Molly's voice drifting down from the loft for a moment longer, and then retired to his room. He got ready for bed quickly, and then removed his boots and flannel shirt and sat on the edge of the bed to wait for Molly.

When fifteen minutes had passed and she still hadn't shown up, he started to pace, ignoring the cold floorboards against his bare feet. Maybe she wasn't coming? Maybe he'd misinterpreted her heated glances, or the way she'd prepared the loft for her sisters? Was it possible she didn't understand how much he needed to feel her in his arms? He groaned, and raked his fingers through his hair.

And then, just when he'd figured he'd run out of patience, and was planning on heading up to that loft and *carrying* his wife down to his bed, the door opened, and she slipped through.

He stopped and stared. She'd obviously used the privacy of the

loft to perform her ablutions and change into her nightgown and robe, but she was carrying a dress and petticoats over one arm. Her robe was a faded red, and tattered around the hem, and was the sexiest thing he'd ever seen. She was just stunning, her curls falling down around her shoulders, those light eyes filled with a desire he'd hoped to see. The longer he stood and stared, the more amused she became, and he watched the dimples he loved slowly appear on her round cheeks.

He couldn't stand it anymore. He *had* to hold her. In one quick movement, he crossed to her, wrapped his good arm around her, and lowered his lips to hers.

The kiss was nothing like the one they'd shared at the altar—had it only been a few hours ago? It was hot, and explosive, and when they came up for air, Molly realized that her robe was pooled on the floor behind her, and he was doing a tolerable job of undoing the buttons of her nightgown with only one hand. Then Ash placed a line of kisses across her jaw and down her neck, and found a sensitive spot below one ear, and she decided she just didn't care. She twined her fingers in the hair at the base of his neck, and held on for dear life.

But when one muscular palm cupped a breast through the thin cotton fabric of her nightgown, and she felt the burn clear down to that private area between her legs, she gasped and pulled away. It had been a sudden bolt of desire, as powerful as a lighting strike, and it left her shaken. She put one hand against his broad chest to slow his inexorable advance.

"Ash." His name was almost a gasp. She felt like she was panting; things were moving so quickly. "Ash, I've never done this before."

His smile was fleeting, this taciturn husband of hers who rarely laughed. "I know, honey." He dropped a kiss to her exposed shoulder. "You'll have to trust me." Another kiss, and Molly shivered.

"I..." She felt like her tongue was made of lead, her brain made of cotton. All she knew was that she loved this man, and loved the way his lips made her feel. Her objections seemed silly, now.

"It'll be fine, sugar, trust me." Molly thought she might have nodded, but at that moment, callused fingertips brushed lightly against one bare nipple, and she couldn't think anymore.

Lord knows how he managed to get the rest of her nightgown off, but she helped him peel off the undershirt that somehow had gotten stuck on his cast. When he dropped his jeans and longjohns, she blushed and tried to look away, but he caught her chin. "It'll be fine, Molly." His kiss was deep and gentle and strong and reassuring all at once.

When she thought she couldn't stand another moment of the build-up, Ash guided her over to the bed. He sat down on the edge,

and looked up at her with something akin to adoration. Molly's heart suddenly lurched, wishing that he *could* love her the way she loved him. He didn't say anything, but ran his good hand down her side, over one ample hip. "...so lovely."

Molly almost scoffed. She'd always been too big, too tall, too broad, too *everything*. But here was a man she didn't tower over, who could hold her tightly with just one arm. Here was a man for her, finally. Standing over him for a rare moment, she ran her palm lightly down one of his cheeks, lingering at the cleft in his chin. She'd loved his kisses with the beard and without, but it was nice to be able to see his sporadic smiles more clearly.

"Molly, with this bum arm, I'm not going to be able to love you the way I want." She didn't understand, and he must have seen that. "You'll have to be in charge." Her breath caught; how could *she* be in charge of their wedding night? "It'll be better for your first time, anyhow."

He pulled her towards him, and then down, until she was straddling his lap, and he showed her what he meant. It was awkward, and painful, and then wonderful and surprising. He taught her the ancient dance, and when they found fulfillment, their arms wrapped around each other in a desperate embrace, he moaned her name.

The sky was lightening to a dark blue in the east when Molly slipped out of his bed. She was mortified to discover that she'd slept next to him all night *naked*. And then, when she realized that *he* was naked too, her blush was hot enough to cook eggs. Thanking the Lord that Ash was still asleep, she quickly—and quietly—performed what ablutions she could, remembering how gentle he'd been when he'd helped her clean up the night before. Pulling on her nightgown and robe, she slipped out of the room.

She stood in the dark main room, looking around the furnishings that had become so familiar in such a short amount of time. She was home. She was well and truly married. She was a woman in love with her husband, and hopeful that someday he might love her back.

She sighed, and smiled ruefully. Well, she knew one way to a man's heart: Through his stomach. Ash liked her cooking well enough, and they might as well start their first day as husband and wife with something delicious.

She did a *lot* more sighing as she mixed up the biscuit dough, thinking about the incredible time she'd spent in his arms. She'd never—not in a million years—have guessed how wonderful it could be between a man and a woman. It made her wish she'd tried it earlier, but she couldn't imagine doing *that* with anyone besides Ash. *He* was the one that made it so special, and made her feel so special.

There were eggs in the icebox, although the chickens were laying

less. But for now, there were enough to scramble with some milk—she'd send Nate out for that when he woke up—and a little salt and herbs. The bacon would be filling, and there was enough butter and jam for the biscuits. She and the girls would have to make some more butter in the next few days, if they wanted some for Christmas supper. As she started the coffee, Molly made a mental note to start a batch of cinnamon rolls rising later that day, for tomorrow's breakfast. Ash seemed to like them.

Her routine belied the significance of the day, but she was quickly coming to realize that life on the ranch—life in general, in fact—wasn't like the frivolous dreams she'd harbored as a girl. Here in the Cheyenne wilderness, a woman could be married without the pomp and pageantry she'd imagined, loved within an inch of her life, and then be back to mixing biscuits the very next morning. The sheer ordinariness was what made the special memories important.

Her musings were interrupted by a strong arm snaking around her middle, and a warm breath on her neck. "Good morning, wife."

His words, as much as his kiss, caused a shiver to race down her spine. *Wife*. "Good morning, husband." She felt him smile against her skin.

And just like that, their lives together began. The rest of their family joined them for that first breakfast together, drawn by the delicious smells and the sound of laughter. They joked and told stories and caught up until well after the coffee pot was empty. Wendy and Molly showed the men more signs than they could remember, including how to sign the letters, so they could spell words to Annie if she was without her slate and chalk. They all had fun making up new signs for things around the ranch the girl was likely to need to know, and Ash seemed particularly intent on making sure he could communicate with her, despite really being able to use only one hand. It warmed Molly's heart, to see the two of them deep in conversation about something trivial. He quickly learned how to get her attention by stomping on the floor, and how to hand her little slate back and forth, scribbling questions and answers in short-hand.

Nate had warmed up to her sisters, too. He often seemed to forget that Annie couldn't hear him, talking to her just like normal. It seemed to simultaneously frustrate her that she didn't always know what he was saying, and please her that he treated her like everyone else. He wasn't so cold to Wendy, either. He wasn't exactly friendly, though; it seemed like he expected disdain from her, and kept a wall of formality between them. Wendy didn't say much to him, either, but she'd stare at him when he wasn't looking, and Molly could see the curiosity in her gaze.

When the men left for the barn after breakfast, she and her sisters

started on the laundry. They unpacked the trunks, and managed to stack them in the loft, putting the clothing and personal items in various chests. Molly moved her things into Ash's room, blushing all the while. They took a break in the middle of the day for Wendy and Annie to work on their lessons, while Molly started on the rolls for the next morning. With Wendy's faint droning in the background, Molly couldn't stop thinking about the hours she'd shared with Ash, and wondering if he'd want to do *that* every night.

Now, if only she could convince her husband to love her as much as she was discovering she loved him...

## Chapter 13

The days leading up to Christmas quickly settled into a routine, and Ash couldn't be more pleased. When he'd first hired Molly, and discovered that she'd be bringing her two younger sisters, he dreaded what would happen with three extra bodies crammed into the cabin. But Molly had told him that while their childhood home had been much bigger, the three of them had been sharing an apartment slightly bigger than the loft for the last four years. To them, the cabin, with its separate bedrooms, kitchen, and living areas, seemed very spacious. Hearing that had made Ash proud; he'd worked hard on the house, and although he knew he'd need to expand it in the coming years—he was already planning a bathing chamber off the back—it pleased him to know that his new family members liked it just the way it was.

Even with the extra mouths, he and Nate were working less. They were able to just focus on the animals, and leave the house chores to the womenfolk. It sure was a treat to come in to a house smelling of cookies and ham, or pull on a soft, clean shirt.

He was coming to know each girl a little better. Wendy couldn't cook anywhere near as well as Molly, but she genuinely seemed to enjoy cleaning. It was like she took clutter as a personal affront, and attacked dirt with a vengeance; a useful girl to have around, Ash figured. She was orderly and studious, and seemed to be peering at a book whenever she was free from chores. But she had a sarcastic wit to rival Nate's, and even made the boy laugh out loud once or twice. When the two of them started on a subject, there were sure to be chuckles all around, especially if Molly was signing for Annie.

It was hard to say what Annie's talents were, since she just seemed eager to please, and would do whatever chores Molly set her to. At first, they were hesitant to let her out of the house, especially when that storm that Ash had smelled on the way back from town hit. The snow was brutal, and quickly trapped them on the ranch. It was a

good thing they'd gotten that last load of supplies, because it looked like they'd be there until the thaw. The snow that piled deep against the porch and the walls kept them well insulated, and they had to dig out the corral and barn.

Annie wanted to learn to take care of the chickens, and once Molly determined that wearing both her winter coats should keep her warm enough for short periods, Nate gladly showed her how to feed the birds in the morning and afternoon, and make sure they got as much sun as possible to keep laying. It seemed to make the girl proud to bring in a few eggs every morning and evening.

None of them realized that the girl wanted to do more, until, a few days after her arrival, she went missing. They were sitting down for dinner when Molly got tired of waiting and climbed the stairs to the loft. She hurried down a few seconds later: "She isn't here!"

The cabin wasn't that big, and it didn't take the four of them long to determine that she wasn't anywhere in it or the outhouse. Ash met Molly's eyes across the room and saw her panic. The snow had stopped, but it was still dangerous outside for any length of time, especially for a little girl like Annie. He and Nate nodded, and grabbed their coats on the way out. A few seconds later, Molly followed, pulling on her coat. She breathlessly explained that Wendy would wait in the house, in case Annie returned.

Nate split off to check the coops and the water pump, while husband and wife continued towards the barn. Ash wanted to check there before he saddled horses to hunt for the girl in the surrounding drifts. He didn't think she had much chance of surviving if she'd become disoriented and wandered away from the cleared areas of the ranch, and he knew that every minute counted.

The horses turned towards them when he pulled open the door and they slipped through. It was a few steps into the barn, though, when he registered an odd noise; a sort of crooning coming from the rear. He exchanged glances with Molly, and they hurried in that direction.

He had to put up a hand to stop his wife, though, when he reached the far stall. The stallion in there was one they'd name Brute, for his size and temperament. They hadn't, in good conscious, sold him last year, sine he wasn't completely tame. He tolerated humans and the comfort they offered, but rarely let anyone to ride him. He was the horse that had thrown Ash, when the man underestimated him.

And there, standing under Brute's neck, stroking his shoulder and humming atonally to him, was delicate little Annie. Ash just about had a heart attack, before he realized that the horse was tolerating the girl's presence. Tolerating, hell; he seemed to be enjoying it! When she



stopped scratching, he jerked his head and let out a whinny that made her smile and concentrate on his thick winter coat. She looked perfectly at ease with the large animal.

“How’d she know what to do with him? She spend a lot of time around horses in Chicago?”

Molly’s whisper matched his, and he could tell how shaken she was. “She’s never been around them before in her life.”

“Well, now...” A slow smile flickered across Ash’s face, and just like that, he gained a new ranch hand. He and Molly had a long discussion with Annie about how she’d handled Brute, and he asked her if she’d like to spend more time with the horses. The little girl’s face lit right up, and there were tears in her eyes when she emphatically nodded. He could tell that Molly wasn’t keen on the idea, and looked pretty disapproving while she translated; but Ash figured Annie could do some of the small jobs around the barn, the little things Ash and Nate didn’t have the time for. She could get used to the animals, and maybe build Molly’s confidence. If he was lucky, what Annie did today wouldn’t be a fluke, and she could prove to her sister that she could be trusted. Of course, he’d have to watch her for the first few months or so, but he figured Nate could teach her plenty too.

It took some convincing on his part, and Nate’s excitement at the idea helped, but later that evening he got Molly’s okay on the idea. Starting on the day after Christmas, he’d introduce Annie to the horses and cow, and come up with a few chores the girl could start with. Molly only agreed to let her younger sister out of the house for so long because she was making Annie some mittens and a hat for Christmas, and figured the girl would be about as warm as she could make her. Ash didn’t really care what her reasoning was; as long as the girl wouldn’t get sick, and could be a help, he was glad to teach her a useful skill.

Yeah, Ash was a pretty content man. He had a well-kept house, hearty and delicious meals, and a ranch with a future. He had his brother standing tall beside him, a wife that he loved, and two lovely young ladies to plan for that future. So how come he felt... strangely unfulfilled? Like there was something he was missing?

It was the night after they’d discovered Annie’s talent, the night before Christmas Eve, when he realized what the problem was. He loved Molly, more than he’d thought it would be possible to love a woman, but she didn’t love him. At least, she’d given him no indication that she loved him, other than the tender way she cared for him; and hell, she treated Nate that way too.

In fact, if it weren’t for the amazing way she came alive in his arms every night, he’d think she was still his housekeeper. Of course,

if you'd asked him a month ago what a wife was, he would have said 'a housekeeper you can make love to.' And *hooo-boy* did he make love to Molly. He'd never had a woman so fulfilling in bed. She was gentle and wild, insatiable and generous, and if he hadn't been in love with her before, he would've been lost the moment she climbed in his lap and wrapped her arms around his neck. He'd *never* imagined a woman could match him so perfectly, and satisfy him so completely. He was content and happy with his new life, and it was all thanks to Molly.

But it hurt him, someplace deep down in his stomach, to think that she didn't love him the way he loved her. Of course, Ash knew that no self-respecting man would go around spouting off romantic drivel like that, so it was hard to even admit to himself. But yeah, he loved her, and she didn't feel the same way in return.

...Unless, maybe, she did? He groaned and rolled over in bed, pulling the pillow on top of his face so he wouldn't wake her up. Hell, how did *any* man knew what was going on inside a woman's head? Maybe she didn't even know she loved him. Maybe if he told her *his* feelings, she'd tell him what she felt, what he wanted to hear?

But how in the world was he supposed to admit how he felt to her first? He'd always considered himself a brave man, but the idea of confessing his love for her, only to receive disdain—or, oh God, even worse: pity!—in return made his stomach churn with fear.

He struggled with the dilemma for the rest of the night, and through the next day. Everyone noticed that he wasn't in a very good mood, and both Nate and Wendy teased him about it. Even their jokes couldn't bring him out of his bad temper, and they left him be. He could see Molly watching him with concern, but that made it even worse. Maybe she *did* love him? The only way he was going to know for sure was if he manned up, and told her his feelings.

He was going to have to, in order to have any hope for the future with the woman he loved. His wife. He was going to have to sit her down and tell her how he felt, and hope that she was willing to love him in return. The not-knowing was cramping his stomach, and once he made the decision to do it, he had to find the right time. He didn't want to just blurt it out, because then she might not think about it fully before responding. He would have to watch, and wait, for the perfect opportunity.

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For Molly, the twenty-fourth of December was a trial of patience. She was determined to make this Christmas something special, since it'd be their first one all together, and their first real celebration in many years. Nate was nearly as excited as Annie to learn all about the traditions and customs, and she was thrilled to share them. She'd been cooking for days, treats and special concoctions she knew or guessed

they would like. The meal she was planning was sure to be a grand one.

But for some reason, she just couldn't get into the spirit of things on Christmas Eve. Perhaps it was the fact that Nate hung around the house most of the day, asking questions and interrupting her tasks; although it was hard to fault the boy for his excitement. It was more likely Wendy's petty disagreements with him. The girl seemed to seek out ways to pick on Nate, which was difficult with someone of such good humor. But whereas Nate was usually good-natured, he seemed to lose all sense around Wendy; she could make him blush and stammer like a schoolboy, and Molly could see how much he hated that reaction.

Molly finally threw her hands up and banished Nate to the barn and Wendy to the loft for a few hours. She quickly relented, though, when she realized how much more she needed to get done for the evening meal. The younger girl was quiet and moody, and Molly suspected she knew the reason. Wendy *liked* Nate, perhaps more than she thought she should, and compensated for the confusion she was feeling by teasing and heckling the young man. Molly had no idea how Nate felt about her sister, but knew that Wendy was going to have to come to terms with him, in order for them all to live comfortably.

Annie, meanwhile, was floating around on top of a cloud, humming atonally to herself, thrilled beyond measure that Molly had given permission for the girl to do chores out in the barn. Her happiness made Molly feel guilty for considering denying the request, but she'd been concerned over the girl's health. Still, it was hard to deny that Annie had a talent with the horses, and Ash could use more help.

Ash! Her husband was the real reason she was feeling so out-of-sorts. He'd been grumpy that morning, barely doing more than grunting at her over breakfast. No matter how she tried to engage him, he was drawing further away from her, and had been over the last few days. She was, frankly, devastated at the thought that her husband of a week could be bored with her already. Oh, he still made love to her at night, and there was nothing perfunctory about it. No, in fact, their love-making had taken on a desperate quality, as if he didn't think he'd ever be satisfied. She sighed, a small smile of contentment on her lips. She didn't think *she'd* be satisfied, didn't think she'd ever get enough of his body, his touch.

Then she shook herself, frowning at her own daydreaming. He might touch her like a man in love with his wife, but his attitude in the daylight was very different. Why, he didn't even kiss her this morning, and seemed distracted and tense. In fact, he seemed anxious

to get out of the house. Away from her.

She stewed in her doubts all day, and by the evening meal she was just a bundle of nerves. Ironically, Ash seemed much improved. He was as charming as he'd been before they'd married, and seemed to search out reasons to touch her. His kisses left her flustered, confused, and utterly aroused. She'd spent the day in a huff, and suddenly the reason for it was missing, and she felt deflated and disoriented.

Ash and Nate kept the conversation lively, though, with Annie chipping in where she was able. They drew Wendy out of her sulk, and before the meal was over, the girl was laughing along with them.

After the kitchen was cleaned and the evening chores completed, Ash built up the fire in the hearth, and they settled down to admire the tree, the decorations, and the buttery pastries Molly had made for dessert. Annie was sitting on Ash's lap, Nate was standing with one arm resting on the mantel, and Wendy sat in a kitchen chair that the boy had carried over for her. Molly noticed that her younger sister blushed whenever she looked at Nate, and hoped that the two of them could just sit down and talk about their feelings.

That's when it hit her, and she had to close her eyes against the burst of dread. She and Ash were going to have to 'just sit down and talk about their feelings'. She loved her husband, and he needed to know that. Plenty of women were in marriages where their husbands didn't love them back, and she was lucky enough to have a man who treated her beautifully, in love or not. Once she told him how she felt, maybe he'd tell her what had caused his bad temper, his avoiding her, and his apparent turn-around.

"So, how did your family celebrate Christmas Eve?" Ash's rich baritone pulled her from her thoughts, and she opened her eyes to him engaging Wendy in conversation. The middle sister unconsciously translated for Annie as she spoke.

"I can remember the delicious food, and then we'd stay up late waiting for St. Nicholas. At least, I would. I think Molly thought it was a little silly." She gave her older sister a glance, and Molly stuck her tongue out, which caused a chuckle.

Wendy wasn't entirely wrong; it wasn't that Molly wouldn't have loved to believe in a jolly old elf that traveled the world granting goodwill and presents, it was that she outgrew those sorts of things at a young age. She was eight years older than Wendy, after all, and her young years had been very different from her sisters', having been raised alone by their mother.

"What would St. Nicholas do?" Nate's question surprised them, and Wendy flushed and looked away, as if embarrassed that he wouldn't know something that had been so integral to her childhood.

Molly made sure no trace of pity entered her voice when she told him, and signed for Annie, "St. Nick is the spirit of Christmas, symbolizing the goodwill and peace we're all supposed to feel this time of year. According to legend, he travels around the world on a flying sleigh," the young man chuckled, and she smiled, "Comes into houses through the chimney, and leaves presents for children."

His smile was rueful, the little heart-breaking one that meant he was embarrassed at not knowing something. "I've heard of him in town, I just figured he was some kind of religious person."

Ash spoke up, "He was, but now he's for kids." He cleared his throat. "I'm sorry, Nate, that I never shared this kind of stuff with you when you were younger."

The younger man shrugged. "Nothing we can do about it now."

"Yes there is!" Molly was firm. "We are having a real Christmas this year, and if that means a visit from St. Nicholas, then so be it! In fact, there's a poem by that same name, and oh, I wish I had a copy of it. I don't even remember who wrote it, but it's such a wonderful introduction to the legend, and a lovely poem besides."

Suddenly, Wendy jumped up. "I think I have it!" She hitched up her skirts and ran for the loft, back in less than a minute waving a book. "I bought this collection of American poets a year ago." She sat back down, angled the book towards the fire, and started flipping through it, talking to herself. "Clement Moore wrote it, but he wasn't proud of it, because it was a children's poem. He published anonymously, but this collection included it with his work, because—ah! Here it is!"

She adjusted her glasses on her nose, and Annie slipped off Ash's lap to stand over her shoulder, to read along. Molly smiled to see Ash settle back with his eyes closed, and Nate lean forward expectantly.

"'Twas the night before Christmas, and all through the house, not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse..." Wendy's clear voice captured the meter and rhyme of the poem, and they were all swept up in the quaint tale. When she was finished, she shut the book with the satisfied sigh she always let out after reading something she enjoyed.

The rest of them were quiet for a moment, until Nate cleared his throat. "I liked that. Thank you."

She blushed, but looked him in the eyes. "I'm glad. It's a nice story, and everyone should be able to enjoy Christmas." He blushed too, and Molly shared a smile with Ash.

Suddenly, Annie made her attention-getting grunt, and pointed to her shoe, and the fireplace. They didn't understand, until she signed "sock", "mantel", and spelled "gifts". Wendy burst out into laughter. "Oh! 'The stockings were hung by the chimney with care!'" She gave

the little girl a quick hug. “Annie wants to hang up stockings, like we used to do, Molly. Oh, can we?”

“Yes, can we?” Nate’s eager young face was endearing, and of course Molly said yes. Annie raced upstairs to get socks for her and her sister, Nate took off one that he was wearing, amid jokes, and Molly ducked into Ash’s room to get one of his and one of hers. His sock had a darn in the heel where she’d fixed in a few weeks before, and as she felt it, she was struck by how much her life had changed in such a short amount of time. She was a wife, and about to embark on her first Christmas with her new family.

She was smiling when she returned to the main room, and with much laughter and teasing, they hung their socks from the mantel. They finished the evening by reading the Christmas story from the worn-out Bible Ash had carried with him from St. Louis all those years ago, and which was all the more precious for the tears and stains. And then, bidding each other good night, they retired to their respective rooms.

After she’d readied herself for bed, knowing that Ash was waiting for her, Molly made her excuses to slip back into the main room. She remembered how early Wendy used to wake up on Christmas morning, and assumed Annie—and maybe Nate—would be the same way. She removed their presents from the cabinet she’d hid them in, made sure that their wrapping was intact, and arranged them just so around the tree. The smaller treats she was able to fit into the socks, and had to stifle a giggle while doing so. She never imagined that *she’d* be acting as St. Nicholas one day, and had to admit that it was just as exciting as opening presents on Christmas.

By the time she returned to Ash’s room, he was nearly asleep, but not so tired that he couldn’t take her in his arms and make beautiful love to her. He fell asleep soon after, and despite the turmoil of emotions roiling inside her—love, concern, excitement—exhaustion won out, and she fell asleep with her cheek pillowed on his warm shoulder.

## Chapter 14

Ash opened his eyes much earlier than usual the next day, and a slow smile spread across his face at the realization of the date. It was Christmas! Lord, when was the last time he’d felt this excitement at Christmas time? Not since he was a kid, he knew, and a young one at that. And it was all thanks to the hard work of the woman beside him.

Knowing that today was the day that he would tell her, he rolled over and took her in his arms, nuzzling her neck. He made slow, sweet love to her, and she came fully awake in time to find fulfillment. He

smiled against her skin, and looked forward to the day that Doc Sanderson would cut this damn cast off, and he could support his own weight over her. He was going to love her like she'd never felt before.

"Mmmmmm." Her stretch reminded him of a feral barn cat, satisfied and sensual. Her smile was sleepy, though, and he just had to kiss her nose. "Happy Christmas, husband."

"Happy Christmas, wife." Now was a perfect moment. "I want to tell you something."

She smiled, pure and sweet, but put a finger to his lips. "And I want to talk to you, too. But I can hear the girls upstairs, and I shouldn't have lingered in bed this long. Can we talk later?"

He shrugged, and laid back to watch her slip out of bed and perform her ablutions. He'd hung up a blanket in the far corner, and planned to build a screen this winter for privacy. He was a little amused the way she wouldn't dress in front of him, although she had no qualms about undressing. She came back around the screen, braiding her hair, and he joined her in getting dressed.

They entered the main room just minutes ahead of the girls. A very excited Annie came flying down the loft stairs, and squealed when she saw the bulges in their stockings. Wendy laughed when she saw, and called out "I guess 'St. Nicholas' came after all! Merry Christmas!"

There was a lot of hugging and wishing of Happy Christmas, and Molly insisted they all sit down for breakfast before looking at their presents, which of course meant chores first. Poor Annie nearly burst from excitement, but the rest of them enjoyed the anticipation. Molly made cinnamon rolls again; she must have guessed how much he enjoyed them. The whole cabin was wreathed in delicious smells of pine, the coffee, the cinnamon and the flapjacks she whipped up.

After breakfast was cleared away, the morning chores done, and the horses checked on, Molly finally gave Annie the go-ahead to investigate her presents. The look of joy on her face when she went tearing over to the hearth made Ash laugh out loud, and Molly kissed him, spontaneously. Well, he wasn't about to let her go until he showed her how to properly kiss him, and they were both lost in their own little world for a few minutes.

When he came up for air, he was aware of distant giggles and exclamations. The younger members of their family were busy removing stuff from their stockings, and Molly was distracted by their excitement. They crossed to the hearth, where Ash was surprised—and even delighted—to see that *his* stocking was bulging too. She'd stuffed it full of the same things in the kids'; peppermint candies, wrapped salted caramels, a package of delicate sugar cookies, a few drop-candies, and an apple in the toe.

He turned to her, pleased that she'd taken the time to make such treats, and she blushed. "When we were children, there was always an orange in the toe. But I didn't see any at Bullards'."

Nate spoke up, around a mouthful of caramel, "They were gone early in the season. He'll get more, but they always get snatched up." He swallowed. "These are great, Molly! Delicious!"

"Good." Her smile was indulgent. While everyone was busy exclaiming over their goodies, she worked over a pot of boiling milk on the stove, and soon had a tray of mugs of steaming, decadent hot chocolate waiting for each of them. They lounged around the hearth, sipping and laughing, enjoying the morning.

Ash noticed Molly's stocking was still full, so he took it down, and found the same treats that were in the rest of their socks. She not only took the time to make sure that they would all have something for Christmas morning, but stayed up late the night before to arrange everything, *and* put things in her own stocking, so little Annie wouldn't know she'd been the one to do it.

"Ash and I have some things for you, too." Ash loved her smile, the one that showed off her dimples. She crossed to the tree, and started pulling out twine-wrapped bundles out from under the lowest branches. He joined in the exclamations of surprise.

She'd made mittens and hats for the girls; lovely, embroidered coverings made of the softest gray he'd seen, and very cozy. He was amazed to find something similar in a package she handed him; a thick scarf of the bright blue wool, with his name and whirls picked out in light gray along the seam. Nate had a matching one, and tried it on then and there. He gave Molly a hug that nearly lifted the woman off the ground, and she giggled like a little girl.

Each of the kids got a store-bought gift, too. There were two new books for Wendy that Molly had picked out and paid for without him knowing. Nate received a new knife-sharpening kit, and set of wooden puzzles someone more talented than Ash had carved. His younger brother was suitably impressed, and embarrassed Molly with his thanks. Annie unwrapped her bundle, the beautiful doll Molly had picked out, and the little girl's hands shook when she saw the concoction of pink lace. Very carefully, with a look of wonder that made Ash want to hug her, Annie lifted the doll out of the wrapping, and cradled it to her breast. She looked up at them, and no one needed to see her sign 'thank you'; they saw the desperate love and awe in her gaze, and Ash vowed that this little girl, this precious, delicate little life, would always be happy here.

The gifts weren't done, though. He ducked back into his room, and came out with a scroll, wrapped in a green ribbon, and handed it to Nate.



“What’s this?” The kid’s—no, the *young man’s*—gaze was inquisitive as he opened the paper. Then he just stood there, holding the deed to half the ranch, staring. After a long minute, hazel eyes turned up to meet gray, and Ash saw the longing, the confusion, and the hope in them. “I...” He tried again. “I didn’t think you were actually going to do it.”

Ash nodded, somberly. He wouldn’t have told Nate, if he wasn’t going to follow through. “Merry Christmas, little brother. Thanks for making this place a success.” The two brothers stepped towards one another at the same time. Ash couldn’t say who reached for the other first, but the embrace was warm, and solid. “I love you, kid.”

“I love you, big brother.”

They pulled apart enough for Ash to include the rest of his family in his gaze, but he kept his arm around Nate’s shoulder. “With you as a partner, Nate, and the rest of these hard workers, there’s no way this place won’t continue to be a success.” He captured Molly’s eyes, and saw something shining in that coffee-brown gaze he couldn’t identify. “I thought we were done for, when I busted this arm. But you saved us, Molly. You came into our lives, and brought these lovely girls,” He nodded towards Wendy, who blushed, “and saved the ranch. And for the first time, brought Christmas to this house.”

Molly smiled, blushing with—he hoped—pleasure. “Thank you, Molly.” The rest of them chimed in their thanks, and her blush deepened. But she didn’t fully understand how much she meant to him, not yet. There was one more thing he had to say to her, before Christmas could be complete.

He dropped his arm from Nate’s shoulders, gave him a good glare, and jerked his head towards the girls. The younger man didn’t quite understand, until Ash turned his look on Wendy, who smiled, and pretended great interest in Annie’s new doll. Nate’s face suddenly lit up, and he smiled. “Say, uh, Wendy, how about teaching me how to sign ‘Happy Christmas?’” He quickly joined the girls on the other side of the room.

Ash took a deep breath and, turning to Molly, snagged her hand and pulled her towards their room. There wasn’t much privacy in the cabin, and Ash was beginning to regret it. He’d have to think about putting that extra room in sooner rather than later. He kicked the door closed behind them.

And then he was staring down into her eyes, full of confusion and happiness and that something else he’d noticed. He took another deep breath, suddenly at a loss, and nervous as a kid.

“Molly, I’ve got something to say to you.”

It seemed like an eternity, but he just couldn’t get the words out. She smiled, and he got side-tracked. “I’m sorry I didn’t get you

anything special for Christmas.”

“Oh!” She held up her left hand. “You did! This ring was totally unexpected.” He smiled, pleased that she appreciated the surprise. It had been expensive, but worth it. She made him smile more than he’d ever smiled before, and he’d come to love that about her, too. Who would have thought that when he’d chased his kid brother into Cheyenne, he’d find a woman who could match him in every sense? A woman who was his equal. A woman he would come to love.

“Well, alright, we can call it an early Christmas present. I love my new scarf, by the way.”

She reached up to stroke his cheek, and he captured her hand, and brought it to his lips to kiss her fingertips. She shivered, and he smiled against her hand. “I love the way you taste. I love the way you feel.”

He dropped her hand and pulled her closer to him, dropping a quick kiss on her lips as he did so. “I love the way you make me feel. You brought joy to this house, to me, and that’s the best present anyone has ever given me. I love that.”

There were tears in her eyes, threatening to spill over. He took a deep breath and forged ahead. “I know you said you wouldn’t settle, wouldn’t marry a man who didn’t love you. I want you to know that you haven’t.” She gasped. “I love everything about you. I love *you*, Molly Murray Barker.”

“Oh, Ash!” The tears fell, but she didn’t seem to notice. Ash barely noticed, he was so anxious about her response. Was that pity he saw in her eyes, or could he hope that maybe, just maybe, she felt something similar for him? As long as it wasn’t disdain, he figured he could handle it. As long as she was willing to build a life with him, he could convince her, over many years, that he was worthy of her love

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“I love you, Ash Barker! I’ve loved you since before you proposed, I just didn’t know it. You are the kindest, strongest, most gentle man I’ve ever met, and I never thought that you would feel the way I do about you!”

His anxiety and fears melted away, gazing down at the woman he loved. He pulled her into a crushing hug, and then kissed her. It was a kiss that went on forever, and showed her the depths of his love. It was hot, and gentle, and full of promise for later.

After, neither of them spoke for a long moment, content just to hold one another. He was thinking about their life together, how it had just started, and how, if he was lucky, it would go on for many years. He didn’t know what the future held, but with this woman beside him, he was confident that he could face anything. She managed to make their lives special, in the midst of the mundane.

Christmas had always been just another day for them, unless they could make it into town. But even with the chores and the work they had to do, she'd made today something truly worth cherishing. A day they'd all remember for a long time.

"What are you thinking?" His voice was barely a whisper.

She sighed. "About life. With you, here on the ranch. It's so different from what I always imagined, but I've realized that it's everything I could ever want." Ash thought his heart couldn't hold anymore happiness, until she said that. "This life isn't going to be easy, but I'm glad I'll be able to share it with you. Even something like Christmas is more special, knowing that I'm celebrating it with you and the girls and Nate here on your land."

He kissed her again, hard and fast, unable to contain his joy. "I love you, Molly. I think I half fell in love with you that day in Cheyenne, when you stood up to me."

Her cheek was pillowed against his chest, but he felt her smile. "I love you, too. Merry Christmas, Ash."

He smiled, more than content. Her love was the best gift he'd ever received, and he *knew* he owed it to the magic of the season. "Merry Christmas, wife."

Happy Christmas, dear readers,  
and best wishes for a beautiful New Year!

Look for Wendy and Nate's story,  
coming Christmas, 2014.